## Tafsīr of

# SŪRAH AL-BAQARAH

A MADĪNAN SŪRAH, REVEALED
IN THE EARLY POST-HIJRAH PERIOD, 286 VERSES

## THE CENTRAL THEME OF THE SŪRAH

The central theme of this sūrah is a call to faith. There is a passing reference to faith in sūrah al-Fātiḥah, but in a broad context springing from a sense of gratitude for Allāh's providence and mercy. Here, faith is treated in detail. In explicit terms, this sūrah invites us to believe in the Qur'ān as the book of Allāh and in Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, as His Messenger. Whereas sūrah al-Fātiḥah refers to belief in Allāh, sūrah al-Baqarah underscores the need for belief in prophethood.

Faith, in fact, takes on a recognisable form only through a belief in prophethood. In the absence of a belief in the Prophet, belief in Allāh alone cannot shape our lives so as to be in accord with the Divine will.

Belief in prophethood flows naturally from belief in Allāh. Indeed, the one follows the other as a natural corollary. Belief in Allāh generates in the human being a longing and an intense desire for His guidance. This is quite clear from the supplication *ihdina-ṣ ṣirāta-l mustaqīm* - guide us on, along the straight way - in sūrah al-Fātiḥah. It is in response to this supplication that sūrah al-Baqarah invites the human being to believe in the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him. In effect, the supplicant is told that having recognised Allāh as his Sovereign, and Allāh's right to be worshipped, he should then believe in this scripture and in the Prophet to whom it has been revealed, if he truly seeks Allāh's way and His guidance.

## THE AUDIENCE OF THE SŪRAH

Addressing the Jews, the sūrah refutes their false assertion to be the only lawful claimants to moral and spiritual leadership.[29] They also regarded it as an insult to believe in any prophet born outside their lineage from among the unlettered Arabs.

Addressing the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, the sūrah advises him to be patient and firm, while explaining that his ministry indeed signified the fulfilment of the prayer Ibrāhīm made while building the Ka'bah. He is assured that despite all the hostilities and the opposition of his envious adversaries, Allāh will ultimately cause his message to prevail and His religion to triumph over all other religions.

Addressing the Muslims, it tells them that they have been raised by Allāh as a special *ummah* or community to bear witness to other people concerning His religion and that they have been entrusted with His last

[29] Iṣlāḥī's references are to the Jewish tribes of Madīnah and environs of the period. Their scholars declared that in view of the religious knowledge already in their possession, they were in no need of any further preaching. The Qur'ān admonishes them and urges them to self-reformation. The sūrah's censure of the Jews of Madīnah is similar to the clash between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, in particular the Pharisees, e.g. Luke 11:38. (Translator)

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Sharī'ah (Divine law). They should realise the importance of this great trust and fulfil their obligations in this respect in order to serve as the leaders of humanity and provide a model for future generations. At various places, they are also warned of the hostile activities of Jews conspiring to sow seeds of doubt and suspicion in their minds and so deprive them of the blessings of the final Prophet and the pure message of Allāh.

Addressing the descendants of Ismā'īl (the Arabs), the sūrah presents the true religion of Ibrāhīm in its pure form, free from the innovations and distortions introduced by polytheists and the descendants of Israel. They are told that it is indeed a great favour from Allāh that He has raised His last Prophet from among them, and has chosen him to transform them into a community submitting to Him. They should appreciate this great favour of Allāh upon them and not fall for the wicked plots of their enemies and become losers in the process.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS OF THE SŪRAH

The detailed analysis of the sūrah's contents will be given when we explain its various portions separately. Below, however, is an overview of its contents in the hope that it will help in understanding its central theme and how each of its parts relates to it.

In our view, this sūrah, so far as its subject-matter is concerned, contains an introduction, four sections and an epilogue.

### Verses 1-39: Introduction

This is the introductory part which indicates who would and who would not believe in this Book. It describes the psychological problems and mental reservations of the disbelievers concerning the revelation of the Qur'ān. The descendants of Ismā'īl are warned that they would invite damnation if they allow themselves to be distracted by Jewish assertions and in consequence deprive themselves of this great blessing of Allāh upon them.

This introductory part ends with the story of Ādam being honoured as God's vicegerent on earth, and the envious reaction of Satan and his hostility towards Ādam. The story of Ādam and Satan is, as it were, a mirror that reflects the situation faced by the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, soon after the public proclamation of the Qur'ānic message. This situation was characterised by both sympathy and hostility from those around him. Thus, the angels who raised questions about Ādam's honoured status, when given a satisfactory answer, accepted it without reservation. They represent here those people who were reluctant to accept, or initially opposed to, the prophetic message because of their inability to comprehend certain aspects of it. Nonetheless, they were good and sincere seekers of truth and not stubborn and jealous opponents. As

soon as they were convinced, they embraced faith and became its staunch helpers and supporters.

The opposition offered by Satan, on the other hand, exemplifies the hostility of those who were motivated by racial pride and self-importance. Such was the hostility of some Jewish and Quraysh leaders to the Prophetic message. Explanations and proofs of the truth did not diminish their hostility. Indeed, it increased their hostility all the more. The more the truth of the message of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, became apparent, the more intense was their opposition to it.

The story of Ādam and Satan mirrors the controversy between Islām and its adversaries. But just as Allāh blessed Ādam with vicegerency on earth despite Satan's opposition, similarly the prophethood of this unlettered Prophet, the sūrah makes clear, will also succeed notwithstanding the opposition.

**Verses 40-121: Only through faith and deeds**

In this section the descendants of Israel are invited, in clear terms, to believe in the unlettered Prophet whose advent was prophesied in their scriptures. They are also warned against violating the covenant taken from them in the Torah to be in the vanguard of those who believe and support the message of truth brought by him, and not be the first in opposition. They should desist from the shameful practice of deceiving others by dressing up falsehood as truth. In this struggle for self-reformation, they are advised to seek help through patience and Prayer (verses 40-46).

They are told that real honour and access to Allāh can be achieved only through faith and good deeds and not by relationship to any specific family or group. They had succumbed to the mistaken belief that the honour and high status given to them was simply because they were the descendants of prophets Ibrāhīm (Abraham) and Ya'qūb (Jacob), peace be upon them both. Consequently, they had come to put their trust solely in special familial and tribal connections instead of faith and good deeds. This mentality prevented belief in the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him. They are told here that all honour and grace was bestowed by Allāh, and that blessings, past and future, come from Allāh alone. They are reminded that just as He bestowed blessings upon them, He also punished them repeatedly for ingratitude and transgression. Therefore, instead of pinning their hopes on family and racial ties, they should sincerely turn to Allāh, and not follow superstitions while rejecting the truth (verses 47-63).

Thereafter follows a detailed account of Jewish history - how at various times covenants with Allāh were violated and His commandments disobeyed. Reference is also made to those superstitions and preoccupations that resulted in a loss of all respect and regard for Divine scripture

and law. Hence it was inevitable that He should remove the descendants of Israel from the position of leadership and give it to those who were really deserving of this great trust (verses 64-121).

**Verses 122-162: Prophet Ibrāhīm's story**

This section describes the part of Prophet Ibrāhīm's life related to the construction of the Ka'bah. It describes his prayer for a community submitting to God and for a prophet to be raised from among them. Firstly, it explains that the religion of Ibrāhīm and his descendants was 'Islām' or submission to God, rather than Judaism or Christianity. It was precisely to call people to this Islām that Allāh had raised a 'middle community', with the Sacred Mosque in Makkah as its spiritual centre or *qiblah* - fulfilling the prayer of Ibrāhīm - rather than Bayt al-Maqdis, the Sacred Mosque of Jerusalem. Initially this new community turned in prayer to Bayt al-Maqdis, but this was a temporary measure that was superceded by the permanent adoption of the Ka'bah in Makkah as the *qiblah*.

There is also a subtle hint here to the fact that this *qiblah* was still in the possession of the polytheists. The believers will have to sacrifice their wealth and lives in the struggle to gain it from them. They can succeed in this struggle only with the aid of Allāh which can be obtained through patience and Prayer.

The purpose of this whole narration is to show that Prophet Muḥammad was the same Prophet and his followers the same community for whom Prophet Ibrāhīm, peace be upon him, had prayed to Allāh. Their message is the authentic message of the community of Ibrāhīm and their spiritual centre (*qiblah*), the true Ibrāhīmic *qiblah*. The narration also mentions the changes the Jewish authorities had made to their religious books in order to destroy all evidence that could link Ibrāhīm with the Ka'bah and "the altar of Marwah".

**Verses 163-242: Laws and commandments**

This is the section of laws and commandments. The basic laws of the Sharī'ah (Divine law) given to the Muslim community are explained. The innovations and fabrications of the earlier bearers of the Book and the polytheists concerning these commandments are also exposed. These laws are not laid out in a legalistic format. Instead, they are explained as and when the Muslim society needed them, for its education, training and general welfare. Briefly, these commandments are as follows: *Tawḥīd* – the belief in the Oneness of Allāh (163-176), Prayer and *Zakāh* (177), the law of retaliation and compensation (178-179), testaments (180-182), fasting (183-187), the prohibition of illicit gains and bribery (188), pilgrimage, laws relating to jihād and spending in the cause of Allāh (189-218), the prohibition of drinking wine and gambling, permission to combine the

affairs of orphans with one's own affairs with a view to improving and reforming their condition, the prohibition of marrying polytheist women[30] (219-221), marriage, divorce, *īlā*,[31] *khul'*, fostering, the welfare of widows, dowry and other matters relating to married life (222-242).

**Verses 243-283: Jihād and spending in the cause of Allāh**

In this section the Muslims are exhorted to wage jihād against the disbelievers in order to liberate the Ka'bah from them. It is in the context of this jihād that they are encouraged to spend and sacrifice. A reference here is made to the battle that the descendants of Israel had to fight against the Philistines to liberate their *qiblah* – the ark of the covenant - that is similar in many respects to the battle of Badr Muslims had to fight against the Quraysh to gain the Ka'bah. Then follows a parenthetical digression and more emphasis on spending in the cause of Allāh. With the help of examples, it is shown what kind of people Allāh leads from darkness into light, and those that He leaves to grope in darkness. The blessings of spending for the cause of Allāh, its etiquette and conditions for acceptance, its characteristics and important categories are described. Along with this, one practice that is diametrically opposed to this spirit of sacrifice and self-denial – usury – is also highlighted and prohibited, followed by some instructions about dealings in credit and the necessary precautions from an Islamic standpoint.

**Verses 284-286: Conclusion**

This is the concluding part of the sūrah. It explains that all that is in the heavens and the earth belongs to Allāh and is in His control: He will call everyone to account for whatever he or she does, in the open or in secret, and that He will forgive whomever He wills, and punish whomever He pleases. It goes on to explain that this Book has been revealed from Allāh, and whether others accept it or not, the fact is that Allāh's Messenger and the believers do so. The sūrah ends with a supplication of the believers, every word of which conveys their great sense of responsibility towards the Book of Allāh – the responsibility that was earlier given to the People of the Book but they had failed in it. That responsibility is now transferred to this new community – the community of Islām.

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30 These three issues, as we shall explain later, are closely related to the commandment concerning spending in the cause of Allāh.

31 Īlā: a husband's vow to abstain from sexual relations with his wife. A persistent abstention in a marriage under such a vow for four months means an automatic repudiation of the marriage. (Translator)

# SŪRAH AL-BAQARAH

A MADĪNAN SŪRAH, REVEALED
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## VERSES 1-5

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

*In the name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.*

الٓمٓ ﴿١﴾

(This is) Alif, Lām, Mīm. (1)

ذَٰلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ ۛ فِيهِ ۛ
هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٢﴾

This is the Book of Allāh; there is no doubt in its being the Book of Allāh. It is guidance for the God-fearing, (2)

الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ
وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Those who believe in the (truth although) unseen, establish Prayer, and spend out of what We have bestowed on them; (3)

وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا أُنزِلَ
مِن قَبْلِكَ وَبِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾

And those who believe in what We have revealed to you (Muḥammad) and what has been revealed before you, and they have firm faith in the Hereafter; (4)

أُولَٰئِكَ عَلَىٰ هُدًى مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ
وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٥﴾

These are on right guidance from their Sustainer, and these are the ones who shall prosper. (5)

## WORD STUDY AND EXPLANATION

الٓمٓ

*(This is) Alif, Lām, Mīm.* (1)

This is a complete sentence, the subject of which is omitted. The full sentence may be read as *Hādhi-hi Alif Lām Mīm* or '(This is alif lām mīm)'. Our translation takes this into account by including the omitted subject.

### Ḥurūf muqaṭṭa'āt or disjointed letters

These disjointed letters, alif lām mīm, and others found at the beginning of various sūrahs, are called *ḥurūf muqaṭṭa'āt* or disjointed letters, because each of these letters is pronounced separately.

Wherever they occur, they are always placed at the head of the sūrahs just as the titles of books, sections and chapters are placed at their beginning. This clearly goes to show that these letters are indeed the titles of the sūrahs that they head. By using words such as *dhālika*[32] (that, masculine) and *tilka* (these, feminine) for these letters at various places the Qur'ān further reinforces the view of their being the titles of these sūrahs. This is also borne out by certain references to them in ḥadīth literature. Not all the sūrahs with these letters are known by them. There are some though that are known by these titles such as Ṭā Hā, Yā Sīn, Qāf, Nūn and others.

Nothing can be said with certainty about the meaning of these letters. This might cause some people to ask how is it that some sūrahs of the Qur'ān have names whose meaning no one knows while the Qur'ān claims that it is a clear book and there is nothing in it which is difficult and hard to understand. In answer to this, we would like to point out that as far the Arabs were concerned, these letters were nothing new for them and they were well aware of their use. Given this awareness on their part, the alleged vagueness of the true significance of these letters does not in any away affect the Qur'ān as a clear book. However, there still remains the question whether using such letters as titles correctly reflected Arabic usage and tradition. The very fact that the Qur'ān uses them in this manner in itself constitutes a most important evidence that indeed it was perfectly in accord with their tradition. That its contemporary Arab audience raised no question about these letters used as titles is a most potent evidence that they were nothing strange for them. Otherwise they

32 As the author explains, the demonstrative pronoun *dhālika* refers to *alif lām mīm*. Thus it would read '*dhālika alif lām mīm*' or 'That is the (sūrah) alif lām mīm.' Similarly the word *tilka* is used in the same way as in the verse '*Ṭā Sīn, tilka āyātu-l Qur'āni wa kitābin mubīn*' (an-Naml, 27:1), meaning, 'This is Ṭa Sīn, these are the verses of the Qur'ān and a clear book.' (Translator)

could have challenged the Qur'ānic assertion that it was a clear and plain book by asking how could it be a book of clarity when even the titles of its sūrahs were incomprehensible. There is no such objection on record though, while it is known that they raised various other objections on the status of the Qur'ān that the Qur'ān itself mentions.

Those who have knowledge of Arab traditions and literature know that the Arabs were not total strangers to such letters. In fact they used them in a similar manner to name persons, things, horses, flags, swords, and even odes and orations. These names could be single letters or a combination of letters and it was not at all necessary for the presence of any prior association between the suggested name and its bearer. Rather, the name itself clearly showed that it was coined especially for a particular person or object bearing such a name.

These letters are merely titles or names specifically designed for the sūrahs they are used in. For understanding the Qur'ān at least, research into their meaning has no special importance. However, since these names are ascribed to sūrahs by Allāh Himself, one would think there must be some essential connection between these names and the sūrahs that bear them. This naturally encourages us to search for their real significance. Thus moved, many of our scholars of old have pondered over the issue. In our view, their work is not a complete waste of time. If as a result of these efforts, we are able to verify certain aspects it will add to our knowledge, but even if we failed to do so, it would at least reinforce our own awareness of our limitation in knowledge while strengthening our belief in the Qur'ān as an unfathomable source of eternal knowledge, without ever entertaining any idea that these names are meaningless and have no significance at all.

The awareness of one's limited knowledge and of the Qur'ān as an inexhaustible treasure is in itself a most significant realisation and an immensely important aspect of knowledge. This approach opens up many fresh avenues of knowledge and insight. The very first letter of the Qur'ān thus leads us to this momentous realisation, and this is also one of the miracles of the Qur'ān.

The opinions of earlier scholars concerning these letters are, in our view, not based on any firm ground. To mention them here would not therefore be of much use. I would, however, like to give here briefly the opinion of my teacher, Hamīduddīn Farāhī, about them. Though not resolving the real issue, his opinion does nonetheless contain a useful suggestion which may prove helpful to others venturing into research in this field.

Those who are familiar with the history of the Arabic script know that the Arabic letters have been adopted from the Hebrew language which were in turn adopted from the letters used in ancient Arabia. In the light of his research into these ancient Arabic letters, Farāhī is of the view that

unlike Latin and Indian letters, these did not represent sounds only. Rather, like the Chinese letters, they stood both for the meaning and the objects they represented, and were written (as pictograms) in the form of the objects that they symbolized. According to Farāhī, these letters were adopted by the ancient Egyptians who later amended or improved them, giving us the hieroglyphics[33] that are still extant in the form of inscriptions found in the Egyptian pyramids.[34]

The meaning of some of them is still well known, and their ancient form is clearly to some extent reflected in the way they are written. For instance, it is known that the letter 'Alif' was used to represent a cow and was also written in the form of the head of a cow; the letter 'bā' in the Hebrew is called 'bet' and also means 'bayt' or house; the Arabic letter 'jīm' in Hebrew is pronounced as 'gimmel' or 'jimmel' meaning a camel; the letter '*ṭā*' was used in the sense of a snake and was written in a manner that represented the form of a snake; similarly the letter 'mīm' was used to represent a water wave and was written in a wavy manner.

Farāhī cites the Qur'ānic sūrah 'Nūn' (sūrah 68) in support of his view. The letter 'nun' is still used in its old sense to mean a fish, and the sūrah so named does mention prophet Yūnus as *ṣāḥib al-ḥūt* or companion of the fish, who was swallowed by a whale. In the light of this observation, it would not be strange if we found that various letters at the beginning of different sūrahs are used because of some affinity between their original significance and the subject matter of the sūrahs in which they occur.

The names of some other sūrahs of the Qur'ān also support this view of Farāhī. Thus, for instance, as stated above, the letter 'ṭā' was originally supposed to mean a snake, and was written in a form resembling it. Now, just consider sūrah Ṭāhā which recounts the story of Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) and describes the transformation of his staff into a snake. Similarly, in sūrahs Ṭā Sīn Mīm, Ṭā-Sīn and others that commence with the letter *ṭā* the miracle of transformation of the staff of Prophet Moses, peace be upon him, into a snake is also mentioned. We have stated earlier that the letter 'alif' was written in a form of a cow's head and also meant a cow. Another symbolism of the letter 'alif' meant the one and the only one God. Now if we look at the Qur'ān, we find that a story of sacrificing a cow is mentioned in sūrah al-Baqarah which begins with the letter 'alif'. We find that *tawḥīd*, the affirmation of the oneness of Allāh, is a common theme of all the sūrahs that commence with the letter 'alif'. It is worth noting that sūrahs with similar names are also identical not only

33 Hieroglyphics is "a complex system, a writing figurative, symbolic, and phonetic all at once, in the same text, the same phrase, ...in the same word."

34 For up-to-date and meticuolous research on the palaeography of the Arabic script see *History of the Qur'anic Text*, by M.M. Al-Azmi, UK Islamic Academy, Leicester, 2003. (Translator)

in their subject matter, but in some cases, even in style.

As stated above, I have described this view of Farāhī here only in the hope that it might lead to some fresh avenues for our understanding of the meaning of the *ḥurūf al muqaṭ-ṭa'āt*. It is just a hint for the serious students of Qur'ānic sciences. Let those who have the stamina and ability pursue further research and investigation in this field. May Allāh help them and make their path easy.

ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْكِتَٰبُ لَا رَيْبَ ۛ فِيهِ ۛ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ۝

*This is the Book of Allāh; there is no doubt in its being the Book of Allāh. It is guidance for the God-fearing.* (2)

*dhālika*

*Dhālika* refers to the previously mentioned name of the sūrah, indicating that this 'Alif Lām Mīm' is a part of the glorious Qur'ān. There are many examples of such allusions in the Qur'ān. Consider, for instance, the following: ﴿حٰمٓ ۝ عٓسٓقٓ ۝ كَذَٰلِكَ يُوحِىٓ إِلَيْكَ وَإِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ۝﴾ *"(This is) Ḥā Mīm. 'Ayn Sīn Qāf. Thus does Allāh, Exalted in Power, Full of Wisdom, send revelation to you as He did to those before you"* (ash-Shūra, 42:1-3). ﴿طٰسٓ تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلْقُرْءَانِ وَكِتَابٍ مُّبِينٍ﴾ *"(This is) Ṭā Sīn. These are the verses of the Qur'ān - a Book that makes things clear"* (an-Naml, 27:1).

The word *dhālika*, say the grammarians, is a demonstrative pronoun that denotes something distant, while *hādhā* denotes proximity. Mistakenly, some people take this to mean that when pointing to a distant object we should use *dhālika* and use *hādhā* when indicating an object that is nearer. But this is not the sense the grammarians have in mind. Instead, what they really imply is that the demonstrative pronoun *dhālika* is to be employed when pointing to a thing of which a speaker is already aware or which has been previously mentioned in the conversation, whereas when pointing to something mentioned later on, the pronoun *hādhā* is to be used. This is how the Arabs use these two demonstrative pronouns, and if they do otherwise it is because of some linguistic considerations of elucidation or eloquence. Thus, if for instance they employ *hādhā* for a thing already mentioned, it is supposed to focus attention on it. Likewise, when *dhālika* is used instead of *hādhā* it is to underline the significance and importance of the thing so mentioned, because it is too exalted and noble to be referred to in direct terms, as it were, to confront it.[35]

[35] The gender difference in these demonstrative pronouns is made because of considerations of eloquence. We do not want to go beyond a certain limit in considering the etymology of various words as further information can easily be found in other books on the subject. We would like, however, to point out that these demonstrative pronouns sometimes refer to the Book or the Qur'ān and sometimes a sūrah. This should explain why at some places '*dhālika*' (masculine) and at others '*tilka*' (feminine) is used.

## Meaning of key words: *kitāb, hudā, muttaqī, īmān*

### *kitāb*

The Qur'ān uses the word *kitāb* in five different senses:

i. *A Divine decree,* for example, in the verse ﴿لَّوْلَا كِتَٰبٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ سَبَقَ لَمَسَّكُمْ فِيمَآ أَخَذْتُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ﴾ *"Had it not been for a decree from Allāh that had already gone forth, a severe penalty would have reached you for what you engaged in"* (al-Anfāl, 8:68).

ii. *The Divine record* in which all things are preserved, for example, in ﴿وَعِندَنَا كِتَٰبٌ حَفِيظٌ﴾ *"and with Us is a record guarding (the full account)"* (Qāf, 50:4).

iii. *A letter and message,* for example, in ﴿إِنِّيٓ أُلْقِيَ إِلَيَّ كِتَٰبٌ كَرِيمٌ﴾ *"Here is delivered to me a letter worthy of respect"* (an-Naml, 27:29).

iv. *Laws and commandments,* for example, in the verse ﴿وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَٱلْحِكْمَةَ﴾ *"and he teaches them the law and wisdom"* (al-Jumu'ah, 62:2).

v. *The Book revealed by Allāh.* It is in this sense that the word is used for the Book of Allāh, referring sometimes to a particular portion of it or to it as a whole. For instance, in the verse ﴿وَٱلَّذِينَ يُمَسِّكُونَ بِٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَأَقَامُواْ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ﴾ *"And those who hold fast to the Book and establish regular Prayer"* (al-A'rāf, 7:170) *kitāb* refers to the Book as a whole. However, in the verse ﴿أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُواْ نَصِيبًا مِّنَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ يُدْعَوْنَ إِلَىٰ كِتَٰبِ ٱللَّهِ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَهُمْ﴾ *"Have you not seen those who have been given a portion of the Book, they are invited to the Book of Allāh to settle their disputes"* (Āli 'Imrān, 3:23), the word *kitāb* here clearly refers to a part or portion of the Divine Book.

Sometimes a word with diverse significations is known and established exclusively in a higher sense. In the same manner the word *kitāb* or book has come to be used specially in the sense of a Book of God. The use of the word in this sense is quite common since ancient times. The Jews termed every book of their prophets as "*sifr*" meaning a book. The Christian translators called these books 'Bible', a Greek word, meaning a book. Likewise, these books were also described as Scriptures, which in Latin similarly means a book. In short, the use of the word *kitāb* for the Book of Allāh is not new.

### *lā rayba fīhi*

*Rayb* is doubt, and the sentence 'There is no doubt in it' means that there is no doubt that this book is indeed the book of Allāh or that it has been

revealed by Him. Coming after the phrase *dhālika-l kitābu*, this is the Book of Allāh, it places emphasis on and reinforces the statement that indeed there is no doubt whatever in its being a Book revealed by Allāh. This interpretation is also supported by Qur'ānic usage. For instance, in this sūrah after a few verses we read: 'And if you are in doubt as to what We have revealed to Our servant, then produce a sūrah like it' (verse 23). Similarly, at another place we read: 'Alif Lām Mīm, the revelation of the Book in which there is no doubt, from the Sustainer of the worlds' (as-Sajdah, 32:1-2), and 'Ha Mīm, the revelation of this Book is from Allāh, Exalted in Power, Full of Knowledge' (al-Mu'min, 40:1-2).

Generally, this phrase - *la rayba fihi* - has been taken to mean that there is nothing in this book the veracity of which could be challenged. As a matter of fact, this is true, for there is nothing in the Qur'ān which could be called into question. There are several reasons, however, why we believe it would be wrong to attribute this meaning to this sentence at this place.

Firstly, the Qur'ānic usage of the word in the examples cited above does not support this sense. Rather it proves the reverse. Secondly, doubt or suspicion is not a characteristic of a book, but of a mental state of a person. A perverse mind can find fault in even a most obvious statement of facts. Making such a statement would therefore serve no purpose. Thirdly, the question of doubt or suspicion primarily concerns the book and its status, whether or not it is truly revealed by God, rather than its contents. Fourthly, rejection of doubt with regard to the book adds nothing special to its significance, because such a claim can be made about any book of mathematics or physics. Fifthly and most significantly, the real difficulty of the first audience of the Qur'ān lay not in the fact that they doubted the veracity of some of its statements: their real problem was that they refused to accept its claim to being a book revealed by Allāh. Therefore, even if their doubts concerning the content of the book were dispelled, its being a book revealed by Allāh would still remain open to question. On the other hand, if the fact that it is a book revealed by Allāh is shown to be beyond doubt, then its veracity is also automatically proven.

***hudā***

In the Arabic language generally as well as in the Qur'ān, the word *huda* is used in several senses:

i. *Moral guidance and insight*, for example, in the verse, ﴿وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱهْتَدَوْا۟ زَادَهُمْ هُدًى﴾ *"But to those who receive guidance, He increases (the light of) guidance"* (Muḥammad, 47:17).

ii. *An argument and a road sign*, for example, in the verses,

*be led to the Garden in crowds"* (az-Zumar, 39:73).

*iv. To avoid sin, fearing its evil consequences and the wrath of Allāh* which encompasses all the other connotations mentioned above. Whenever this word is used without an object it is usually used in this comprehensive sense, of doing right, for example: ﴿وَإِن تُؤْمِنُوا۟ وَتَتَّقُوا۟ فَلَكُمْ أَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ﴾ *"And if you believe and do right, (tat-taqū) you will have a mighty reward"* (Āli 'Imrān, 3:179).

In the light of this explanation, we may define a *muttaqi* or a righteous person as one who lives in awe of Allāh's majesty, fears His wrath, and is fully conscious of the evil consequences of sin.

In *taqwā* it is the state of a person's heart and mind and the avoidance of evil, rather than the practice of good, that are the dominant elements. We may, in this sense, describe it as pre-eminently negative rather than affirmative in essence. It is nonetheless a clear sign of a sound heart, transforming it into a fountainhead of both knowledge and good deeds.

ٱلَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ۝٣

*Those who believe in the (truth although) unseen, establish Prayer, and spend out of what We have bestowed on them;* (3)

***īmān***

The word *īmān* (from the word *yu'minūna*) is the verbal noun of *āmana* the root meaning of which is 'to give refuge'. When followed by the preposition *li* or *la āmana* means 'to testify' as, for example, in *'fa āmana lahu Lūṭ,* (and Lūṭ had faith in him or testified to his truth)' (al-'Ankabūt, 29:26), but if followed by the preposition *bi* it signifies to believe in, and to trust. The real meaning of the word is to have faith, to trust, and to believe. A confidence and certainty along with a sense of awe, fear, trust, and faith is defined as belief or *īmān.* A person who believes in Allāh, His signs, His commandments and laws, entrusts whatever he might have to Allāh's care, and is well pleased and fully satisfied with His decisions, is a *mu'min* or a believer.

When this word (*īmān*) is used along with an object, it refers to believing specifically in what is denoted by its object, but if used without an object, then it may cover all the articles of belief - which we are commanded in the Qur'ān to believe in or which are indicated from the contextual evidence.

**Meaning and significance of *al-ghayb***

The word *ghayb* has been used in the Qur'ān in the following senses:

i. *'That which is hidden from our eyes'* its opposite being *shahādah* or that which can be seen. One of Allāh's attribute is described as *'Ālim al-ghaybi wa-sh shahādah*, meaning that He is Aware of all things, those hidden from our eyes as well the visible ones that we can see for ourselves.

ii. *'That about which one has no means of knowing'*. In the Qur'ān the Prophet, peace be upon him, is asked to say: ﴿وَلَوْ كُنتُ أَعْلَمُ ٱلْغَيْبَ لَٱسْتَكْثَرْتُ مِنَ ٱلْخَيْرِ﴾ *"If I had knowledge of the unseen* (ghayb), *I should have multiplied all good"* (al-A'rāf, 7:188).

iii. *A place that is unknown or a direction difficult to ascertain:* ﴿ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ أَنۢبَآءِ ٱلْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهِ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا كُنتَ لَدَيْهِمْ إِذْ أَجْمَعُوٓا۟ أَمْرَهُمْ وَهُمْ يَمْكُرُونَ﴾ "This is one of the stories of what happened unseen, which We reveal to you: nor were you present with them when they agreed on their plan" (Yūsuf, 12:102).

iv. *'A secret'*. The use of the word in this sense is quite common, for instance, concerning virtuous wives, the Qur'ān says: ﴿حَٰفِظَٰتٌ لِّلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ ٱللَّهُ﴾ "They guard secrets that Allāh would have them guard" (an-Nisā', 4:34).

***yu'minūna bi-l ghayb***

"They believe in the (truth although) unseen." That is, they fully believe although the ultimate reality is beyond the reach of human perception. This gives the verb *yu'minūn* - they believe - a much broader meaning covering all essential articles of belief. The truly righteous, the verse signifies, do not insist on seeing what is essentially beyond the reach of human perception or demand laboratory proof before responding to the call of truth. Rather, they respond to the call of truth because they find it true in the light of reason and evidence from life and nature. The Qur'ān uses *bi-l ghayb* in this adverbial sense at several places: ﴿ٱلَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلْغَيْبِ وَهُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّاعَةِ مُشْفِقُونَ﴾ *"Those who fear their Sovereign Sustainer* (rabb) *unseen - although He is beyond the reach of their perception - and who hold the Hour (of Judgement) in awe"* (al-Anbiyā', 21:49); ﴿إِنَّمَا تُنذِرُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلْغَيْبِ وَأَقَامُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ﴾ *"You can admonish only such as fear their Sovereign Sustainer although He is beyond the reach of their perception and establish regular Prayer"* (Fāṭir, 35:18). Among the earlier scholars, Rabī'ah ibn Anas has offered a similar interpretation. We prefer this view.

The majority of scholars take the particle *'bi'* preceding the word *al-ghayb* to be a preposition: *bi-l ghayb* as the indirect object of the verb *yuminūn*. Thus the words *yuminūna bi-l ghayb* would mean 'and they believe in the unseen.' Although linguistically sound, this interpretation is rather flawed for several reasons:

It restricts belief to belief in *ghayb* only, precluding all other essential elements, whereas if interpreted in the above sense, it covers all the essentials of belief.

A belief in the unseen may cover some elements of belief, but surely it does not cover a belief in the Prophet and the Book of Allāh, although they are both only next in importance to a belief in Allāh.

*Ghayb* is not one of the beautiful names or attributes of Allāh nor is it applied to Him, which means that if we take *yuminūn bi-l ghayb* as 'they believe in the unseen,' it would also preclude even a belief in Allāh, and would cover only belief in the Hereafter and the angels, or at most some events still hidden in the womb of time. Why restrict the field of *īmān* to such a narrow definition?

It is said that *ghayb* here refers to the life in the Hereafter, but if so, why does the Qur'ān mention it separately in the very next verse 'and they have firm faith in the Hereafter'.

This second view misses out a most important aspect of belief or *īmān*: that belief in or fear of Allāh is genuine when it is born of insight and true God-consciousness. A belief or awe that is dependent on witnessing or observing the evil consequences of one's actions is false and unacceptable in the sight of Allāh. About those who believe after having seen the chastisement, the Qur'ān says: ﴿أَثُمَّ إِذَا مَا وَقَعَ ءَامَنتُم بِهِۦٓ ءَآلْـَٰٔنَ وَقَدْ كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ﴾ *"Would you then believe in it at last, when it actually comes to pass? (It will then be said:) 'Ah! now? And you wanted (aforetime) to hasten it on!'"* (Yūnus, 10:51).

One objection that may be raised against the use of the particle '*bi*' in an adverbial sense is that nowhere in the Qur'ān is it used along with '*īmān*' as an adverb. In answer to this, we can also say with equal justification that the word *ghayb* is invariably used in the Qur'ān as a *ẓarf* (in an adverbial sense), and nowhere as *maf'ūl* or an object. Thus the Qur'ānic usage is predominantly in favour of its use in an adverbial sense.

**Establishing Prayer – *iqāmah aṣ-ṣalāh***

The word *iqāmah* means to make a thing stand erect or to straighten it in such a manner that no crookedness is left in it. The Qur'ān says 'they establish Prayer' rather than saying simply 'they offer Prayer'. The use of the word *iqāmah*, establishing, for Prayer serves to draw our attention to several important aspects.

Firstly, this word emphasises sincerity in Prayer. Prayer must be offered to win the pleasure of Allāh only without associating anyone else with Him. The implicit sense of straightness therein cannot be fully realised unless Prayer is observed with a single-minded devotion to Allāh only. At other places, this aspect has been clearly explained: ﴿وَأَقِيمُوا۟ وُجُوهَكُمْ عِندَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَٱدْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ﴾ *"And set your faces straight in every place of worship and call on Him, making your religion sincerely His"* (al-A'rāf, 7:29).

Qur'ān uses it as a definitive term and fully explains it. In the sunnah of the Prophet, peace be upon him, its manner of performance has been demonstrated. Moreover, the Muslim community has preserved its format, timings and contents, in words and movements, and passed them on to later generations through uninterrupted collective practice. The little variation there is, is only marginal, making little difference to its real spirit and essence.

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِمَآ أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمَآ أُنزِلَ مِن قَبْلِكَ وَبِٱلْآخِرَةِ هُمْ يُوقِنُونَ ۝٤

*And those who believe in what We have revealed to you (Muḥammad) and what has been revealed before you, and they have firm faith in the Hereafter.* (4)

**Difference between *īmān* and *īqān***

***wa bi-l ākhirati hum yūqinūn***

The word *ākhirah* means the abode or the life of the Hereafter. The word used in connection with the Hereafter is *īqān* (certainty) rather than *īmān* (belief). There is a slight difference between the two which should be borne in mind. *Īmān* means to testify and to accept, and its opposite is *kufr* or rejection and denial. As against this *īqān* means to be certain and sure, while its opposites are conjecture, surmise or doubt. Just as it is not necessary for a person who is certain of something to believe in it also[37], so is believing in a thing not conditional upon one's being certain about it; a person may not be, to begin with, fully certain about what he believes in. The whole fabric of his belief may be built on the mere likelihood or probability of its being true, but then gradually he moves on until he achieves certainty and perfection of his *īmān* or belief. It is worth noting here that *īmān* or belief precedes *yaqīn* or certainty and some verifiable pratical manifestations of that belief or *īmān*, in a way suggesting that only those possessing the above mentioned characteristics, are truly convinced of the life Hereafter.

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[36] Chaldea – an ancient kingdom in southern Mesopotamia. Babylonia conquered the Israelites in the 6th century BCE and exiled them to Babylon (where Daniel became a counselor to the king). Chaldea is frequently mentioned in the Old Testament. With the decline of Assyrian power, a native governor, Nabopolassar, in 625 BCE became king of Babylon and inaugurated a Chaldean dynasty that lasted until the Persian invasion of 539 BCE. The prestige of his successors, Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562) and Nabonidus (556–539), was such that "Chaldean" became synonymous with "Babylonian." (Translator)

[37] Prophet Mūsa, peace be upon him, showed many miracles to Pharaoh who refused to believe and accept though certain that these were from Allāh. *'And they rejected those signs in iniquity and arrogance, though they were convinced about them'* (an-Naml, 27:12).

أُولَٰئِكَ عَلَىٰ هُدًى مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ۝

*These are on right guidance from their Sustainer, and these are the ones who shall prosper.* (5)

***hudā***

The significance of the word *huda* has been previously discussed. Here it may mean inner light or the straight path. Taken either way, the interpretation of the verse will be correct, as it is also supported both by Arabic idiom and Qur'ānic usage.

***al-mufliḥūn***

The essence of this word - *falāḥ* - is expansion (of the heart), its opening up and unfolding. It signifies success and the pinnacle of achievement which is gained after a long hard struggle. Such success surpasses all expectations and is beyond measure.

**Some questions and their answers**

Whoever considers these verses seriously is bound to raise some questions:

*i.* these verses postulate without any supporting evidence and strong arguments that the Qur'ān is the book of Allāh.

*ii.* it is stated that this book is a guidance for the righteous and the God-fearing. Now if this is a guidance only for the righteous, what is the use of its revelation? What is needed is that the wicked, the wrongdoers and the sinners should be able to benefit from it and be transformed by it into good and virtuous people. If it is to heal those who are already healthy, then what is the benefit of its revelation?

*iii.* the foremost characteristic of the God-conscious, the *muttaqīn,* is described here as believing in the unseen – which is generally considered to be nothing more than another name for blind faith, superstition and following without questioning. If this is true, it would mean that the Qur'ān can only have an impact on those who are superstitious and given to wishful thinking. In other words, its message or arguments have no relevance for rational people who use their minds and try to understand.

*iv.* some characteristics of God-conscious people, the *muttaqīn,* are also mentioned here – they establish regular Prayer, spend in the cause of Allāh, believe in all the Books revealed by Allāh and are certain of the Hereafter. If they have all these attributes, then what other

guidance do they stand in need of that is to be provided by this Book? Is guidance something else, over and above these good qualities?

*v.* besides mentioning *īmān* or faith, only two of the whole range of practical virtues are mentioned here: regular Prayer and spending in the cause of Allāh. What is so special about these two that no other virtuous acts besides them have been mentioned?

There are of course some other questions that may arise about these verses, but anyone can find answers to them after a little contemplation, and therefore we would leave them aside for the present. The above questions are, however, important and we would try to tackle them here.

As to the first question, we need to bear in mind that the people who rejected the Qur'ān were not in any doubt about its being the book of God. At least during the period of the revelation of sūrah al-Baqarah, the early period after the migration, the fact that it is the book of God was already amply clear to all, the people of the Book as well as the idolaters. What held them back, however, from accepting it was not that the truth was not fully clear to them and they could not recognise it. Rather, it was due to a lack of inner moral capacity on their part which is a necessary requirement for the acceptance of truth. As such there was no need to prove that it is the book of God and advance arguments to support this claim. It was quite pertinent to say that this is the book of Allāh and that there was no doubt in its being from Him, but the human being must have the requisite moral suitability before he could benefit from it. And that is precisely what the Qur'ān says: "a guidance for the righteous"; in other words, a person must have *taqwā* and fear of God in order to benefit properly from this book. These words also carry a message of comfort for the Prophet, peace be upon him, telling him that this is indeed the book of Allāh and you are His Messenger; these are self-evident truths and need no further proof. A further elaboration cannot benefit those who have no fear of God in their hearts and who are interested only in the physical pleasures of this life and whose eyes cannot see beyond the world of the senses. They have lost the basic human goodness that is innate in every heart and are blinded by their biases and prejudices.

We must also bear in mind here that the real audience of this sūrah, as will be elaborated later, are the Jews of the time who were not unaware of the final book and the final Messenger of Allāh. According to Deuteronomy, they were promised by Allāh that He would "raise for them a Prophet from among their brethren, ... and will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass that whosoever will not hearken to My words which he shall speak in My name, I will require it of him" (Deuteronomy,

18:18-19). They also knew that through the final Prophet, Allāh will perfect His Divine law, and all prophecies about him will be fulfilled.

The Jews were aware of all these prophecies, and in the message and life-example of Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, they could see a clear evidence of their fulfilment. After the migration of the Prophet to Madīnah especially, all the signs were clearly visible. After seeing these signs, the Jews were convinced that all those prophecies were in fact about the advent of Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him. For, it is a fact that on account of these very prophecies the Jews of the time were already awaiting the coming of a Prophet and a scripture. Considering this, the words *"this is the book from Allāh"* is not a mere assertion and a postulate. Rather, in these words they were told in unambiguous terms: this is the book that was promised to you and for which you have been waiting for so long, affirming the truth of all that you already have in your Scriptures concerning the final Prophet and the final Book of Allāh.

When we consider the question against this background, we find that the assertion that it is the book of Allāh really needed no proof. The People of the Book only needed to change their attitude and stop looking at the whole affair through the eyes of prejudice and envy, and to receive the Book for which they had been awaiting for ages and experience its untold blessings.

As to the second question, its answer is, to an extent, included in the answer to the first question. We will, however, explain certain other aspects of it which may not be clear.

For any thing to leave an impact on the human being, its natural power and effect alone are not enough. It is necessary that the person to whom it is directed should also have the capacity to receive and absorb it – to be influenced by it. However brightly the sun shines it is useless for the blind, while the sweet warbling of a nightingale brings no joy to the stone deaf. Such people cannot see, hear or appreciate the beauty of sight and the sweetness of sound. Similarly, it is true that the Qur'ān is light, guidance and a source of impeccable truth and wisdom, but if a person has lost his faculty to see and hear, to understand and appreciate, then he will not be able to benefit from its light and guidance. The Qur'ān is of little avail to such morally blind and deaf people. Thus we read in the Qur'ān: *"Verily in this is an instructive warning for whosoever fears (Allāh)"* (an-Nāzi'āt, 79:26); *"Verily, in this is a message for any that has a heart and an understanding or who gives ear and earnestly witnesses the truth"* (Qāf, 50:37). It is this natural capacity of the human being that needs to be kept intact for a person to appreciate and recognise truth and to respond to it that is described in these verses as *taqwā* or God-consciousness.

**Levels of *taqwā***

This *taqwā* has several levels. On the one level, it is something inherent in

all humans, as pointed out in the Qur'ān in the words: ﴿وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّىٰهَا ۝ فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَىٰهَا ۝﴾ *"By the human soul and the proportion and order given to it; and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right"* (ash-Shams, 91:7-8). This level of *taqwā* is an essential pre-requisite to appreciate and to accept any message of truth, virtue and goodness. A person who loses this pre-requisite loses the ability to appreciate or accept any goodness or virtue. It provides the springboard for all good works and a basis of decency, courtesy and kindness. To respond to the message of the Qur'ān, the presence of this *taqwā* or moral sense in human beings is an essential condition. A book like the Qur'ān could not be of interest to thoughtless, degenerate men and women. Only the good and the virtuous and those with some sense of decency and reason could find it of interest. History also bears out the fact that it attracted mainly serious and reasonable persons from among the Arabs, and the followers of the earlier revelation who were righteous and God-fearing.

On the second level comes the *taqwā* that is the fruit and result of following the guidance of the Qur'ān. Without going into a detailed discussion, we may point out here that whereas the words *hudan li-l muttaqīn* refer to the *taqwā* that is a basic condition for benefitting from the Qur'ān, the characteristics of the righteous mentioned in verses *alladhīna yu'minūna bi-l ghayb* to *wa bi-l ākhirati hum yuqinūn*, represent the fruits of the *taqwā* generated by embracing the Qur'ānic guidance.

As to the third question, a belief in the unseen is not a sign that a person is superstitious, nor is it an indication of any weakness of faith. It does, however, show that the human being is a rational and spiritual being, and not just a weak, capricious or simple-minded creature. That is why the Qur'ān specifically mentions it in the present context. There are some people whose interests and efforts are limited to the sensate world. They have neither a mind nor do they make an effort to consider what might lie beyond this worldly life. Even reason, which naturally tends to soar to higher realms of reality beyond the material world, is imprisoned within purely sensate confines. Some people spend all their mental energies well within these limits, for, in their eyes, any venture outside physical existence is merely a waste of time and effort, purposeless wandering in a wilderness.

There are, however, others for whom reason and understanding rather than the world of matter and sensate existence hold real importance. They regard the act of reasoning as the essence of the human being, which distinguishes him from animals. They seek their heart's desire not in transient sensuous pleasures but in spiritual victories and achievements of reason. It is this group of people that the Qur'ān refers to here in the words *alladhīna yuminūna bi-l ghayb*, for they alone can rise and soar to the moral and spiritual heights that it can take them to. It likens the first group to cattle or even worse off than cattle, saying: *"Do you think that most of*

*them listen or understand? They are only like cattle; on the contrary, they are even farther astray"* (al-Furqān, 25:44). In other words, those who have reduced their understanding and reason to the position of a slave to their material needs and pleasures – they are the foolish people who would use a precious cavalry sword as an implement to mow their lawns.

Those who believe in the unseen without having actually to see what they believe in are not blind worshippers. On the contrary, they use their reason and accept whatever is proven in its light or supported by evidence from nature. If they have to sacrifice some of their physical and material pleasures and comforts in the process they do so gladly, without any hesitation or reluctance.

The answer to the fourth question is covered to a certain extent in the answer to the second question, but we may still elaborate on it a little further.

Firstly, we need to bear in mind that the characteristics of the *muttaqīn* that are mentioned are illustrative in nature. Those who truly deserved to be described as *muttaqīn* at that time have been identified by the Qur'ān here as the decent, upright people who had the moral sense or *taqwā* to be able to benefit from the Divine guidance. These characteristics are not set out here as the primary conditions for benefiting from the Qur'ānic guidance. Rather, these are the result and the fruits of following the Divine guidance.

Secondly, what the Qur'ān describes as *hudā* - guidance - is a higher reality than deeds and beliefs. Good deeds and beliefs are either the fruits of this guidance or the means of obtaining it; as such they are not synonymous with guidance. The more a person's commitment to good deeds and belief grows, the more will he gain in guidance. Allāh says: ﴿وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱهْتَدَوْا۟ زَادَهُمْ هُدًى﴾ *"And for those who receive guidance, He increases (the light of) guidance"* (Muḥammad, 47:17).

**Two basic virtues**

As to the last question, we should point out that, from pondering over the Qur'ān, it appears that there are two basic virtuous acts in Islām: the regular Prayer (*Ṣalāh*), and regular charity, *Zakāh*. All other virtuous acts come under them, or rather flow out of them. When at numerous places the Qur'ān mentions these two jointly, there is no need to mention other virtues separately. Consider, for instance the following verses in the Qur'ān: ﴿فَإِن تَابُوا۟ وَأَقَامُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتَوُا۟ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ فَإِخْوَٰنُكُمْ فِى ٱلدِّينِ﴾ *"But if they repent, and establish regular Prayer, and practise regular charity – they are your brethren in faith"* (at-Tawbah, 9:11). About the Prophet Ismā'īl, peace be upon him, we read: ﴿وَكَانَ يَأْمُرُ أَهْلَهُۥ بِٱلصَّلَوٰةِ وَٱلزَّكَوٰةِ وَكَانَ عِندَ رَبِّهِۦ مَرْضِيًّا﴾ *"He used to enjoin on his people Prayer and charity, and he was most acceptable in the sight of his Sustainer"* (Maryam, 19:55). And Prophet Īsā (Jesus), has been mentioned as saying, ﴿وَأَوْصَىٰنِى بِٱلصَّلَوٰةِ وَٱلزَّكَوٰةِ مَا دُمْتُ حَيًّا﴾ *"And He has enjoined on me Prayer*

*and charity as long as I live"* (Maryam, 19:31).

In all the above verses, only Prayer and charity (*Zakāh*) are mentioned, though they are not the only two meant because all the other virtues are included. Since, however, these two form the basis of all other virtues, and they all stem from them, there was no need to mention them explicitly and separately. When the main root is mentioned, the branches stemming from it are implicitly covered.

These two virtues have a pivotal position in the religion or *dīn* of Islām. What is it that a person needs most to help him become a true servant of Allāh? Firstly, he needs to establish his relationship with his Sustainer on a firm and reliable basis, and secondly, to forge his bond with other creatures of Allāh rightly and correctly. *Ṣalāh*, the regular Prayer, establishes the human being's relationship with His Sustainer on a sound footing, while spending in Allāh's cause establishes his relationship with other human beings on a most appropriate basis. A person who discharges his obligations toward his Creator and Sustainer and recognises his obligations to others has the master-key to unlock the doors to all virtues. The two will help him to understand and adopt other virtues making them so much easier.

A similar position is reported in the Gospel from Prophet Jesus, peace be upon him:

> "And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, you shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second like it is this, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hangs the whole law, and the prophets" (Matthew, 22:35-40).

From the above statement attributed to Prophet Jesus, peace be upon him, it is quite obvious that the whole fabric of religion and law (Sharī'ah) is raised on these two virtues. This is so not only in the Qur'ān, but the Torah, Injīl and other scriptures too.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VERSES 1-5

In its very opening, the sūrah spells out the message that is to form its central theme, namely, an invitation to believe in the prophethood of Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, and the Qur'ān or the book revealed to him. That is why the very first statement it makes is that this is the Book of Allāh and that the Book in itself is a conclusive proof of what

it so emphatically asserts: it needs no external proof. To believe in it, however, is not easy for everyone. Then it speaks about those who will respond to its call to believe, and those who will fail to do so and thus stand deprived of its blessings. The basic requirement to believe, it says, is the purity of the human heart. This makes it plain that those whose hearts are devoid of this quality will not be able to benefit from this book. This quality of the human heart, we are also informed, is maintained through *taqwā*, God-consciousness and fear of God.

Then follows a description of the blessings of *taqwā* or God-consciousness as manifest in both knowledge and practice.

The first fruit of *taqwā* mentioned is *īmān bi-l ghayb* – belief in the truth although unseen. This quality confers a sharpness and alertness to the mind. Its possessors are not constrained like animals within the bounds of a material life and what the senses experience only. They are able to appreciate and accept the higher reality beyond the sensate world, finding justification in their own innate power of reasoning and common sense. They accept the non-material realm just as they accept the material life that is fully observable and verifiable. In fact, there are times, when they are far more certain of these unseen realities than they are of what they see and hear with their physical eyes and ears.

Belief or *īmān* is not a mere concept. Its essence lies in an affirmation and conviction that is firmly entrenched in the heart and motivates a person either to do or shun certain conduct or actions. Of the practical actions, only two are mentioned here: to establish Prayer, and to spend in the cause of Allāh. This is a clear indication that these two actions are in fact the basis of all other virtues and good deeds. Later on, we shall show in detail that this is indeed true and the whole fabric of *dīn* or the religion of Islām stands on these two basic virtuous actions.

**Significance of *infāq***

The reference to spending in the cause of Allāh – *infāq* – is preceded by '*min-mā razaqnāhum* – out of what We have bestowed on them'. This is significant because:

*i.* It is in fact an acknowledgement from us, servants, that all that we have is merely a gift of Allāh.

*ii.* It makes spending an expression of our sense of gratitude toward Him.

*iii.* He does not ask us for all that He has given us - only a portion to be spent in His cause. This makes the difficult task of *infāq* relatively easy.

It is also worth noting that instead of *Zakāh* the word used here is *infāq* which has a wider implication and covers almost all the diverse forms of social spending and charity.

A special characteristic of the *muttaqīn* or the God-fearing, is highlighted in these verses: they are free of sectarian feelings and prejudices but also do not follow others unquestioningly. They do not differentiate between the books revealed by Allāh or the messengers who brought them; they believe in all that has been revealed by Allāh, whether it is to a prophet from among their own or another people. Their only concern is whether the message is truly from Allāh, or whether it is from someone else and falsely attributed to Him, or the words of Allāh interposed with those of others.

Belief in the Hereafter is a part of the belief in the unseen and there is no apparent reason for mentioning it separately. It is specifically mentioned to show that though there are many who profess belief in the Hereafter, only those with these attributes - those who establish Prayer, who spend in the cause of Allāh and who believe in all the revealed books of Allāh - truly and really believe in the Hereafter and are certain of it.

This is followed by the statement that those whose characteristics are mentioned above, are truly rightly guided by their Sustainer, and it is these who will be blessed with ever more guidance. They are on the right path in this world and they are the ones who will prosper and succeed in the Hereafter.

## SOME HINTS AND SUGGESTIONS

The Qur'ān says that it is a guidance for the God-fearing. This was a quality possessed by the early Muslims. By implication this means that they benefitted from the Qur'ān because of being God-conscious and God-fearing even prior to the advent of Islām. Among them were the unlettered Arabs who had successfully preserved their inner light and insight with which they were naturally endowed despite the prevalent general corruption in society. The early Muslims included those from among the People of the Book, who had sincerely been trying to follow the Divine commandments and laws previously revealed to them. In the sight of Allāh they deserved to receive and benefit from His final and perfect guidance.

Let us look a little closely at some subtle Qur'ānic allusions to find out why the majority of Jews of the time rejected truth. The Qur'ān presents the practices and beliefs of the true Muslims and uses their description to hint at those who reject its message. The Jews of the time represented the exact antithesis of all that the Muslims stood for.

Just consider first the words *huda-l li-l muttaqīn* - a guidance for the God-conscious. These point to an important decision of Allāh concerning

the Jews. After the profanity of calf-worship, Prophet Mūsā, peace be upon him, made them offer collective repentance, and put them through hard and arduous tests to purify and absolve them of the effects of sin. He prayed for them to be secure against the wrath of Allāh in future and never again be deprived of His mercy. Allāh accepted this supplication of Prophet Mūsā, peace be upon him, subject to the condition that only those among the Jews who fear Allāh, give regular charity, and believe in what is sent down from Him as His final message through His Final Prophet, peace be upon him, will share Divine mercy. In sūrah al-A'rāf where this important incident of Prophet Mūsā's ministry is related, we also find the following significant verse:

﴿وَرَحْمَتِي وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ ۚ فَسَأَكْتُبُهَا لِلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَالَّذِينَ هُم بِآيَاتِنَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ۝ الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ﴾

*And My mercy extends to all things. That (mercy) I shall ordain for those who do right, and practise regular charity, and those who believe in Our signs – those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet* (al-A'rāf, 7:156-157).

The above verse clearly shows that, of Prophet Mūsā's followers, only those were destined to receive the blessings of the Qur'ān and Islām who were upright, gave regular charity and believed in the messages of Allāh, and who were later to believe in and follow the unlettered Prophet, peace be upon him.

It is this very condition that is invoked here by the words 'a guidance for the God-conscious'. Those among the People of the Book who fulfilled this condition all embraced Islām. This implies that those of them who did not were lacking in the quality of *taqwā* or God-consciousness, an essential pre-requisite for believing in this Book.

Previously, Prophet Ibrāhīm was also informed of the same principle. At the end of a long and arduous series of tests, Allāh finally decided to make Ibrāhīm a leader for all nations. When asked if his offspring were included in this Divine promise of leadership, Allāh responded: ﴿لَا يَنَالُ عَهْدِي الظَّالِمِينَ﴾ *"My promise does not embrace the wrongdoers"* (al-Baqarah, 2:124). The word wrongdoers here clearly refer to those who lacked the qualities of sincerity and belief in One God - whether they were descendants of Ismā'īl or Isḥāq (Isaac). Regarding all such people, Allāh had Himself made it clear that wrongdoers would be those denying the Prophet to be raised as the leader of humankind. They would have no share in the honour that was to be bestowed on him and his community.

The words *yu'minūna bi-l ghayb* - 'they believe in the (truth although) unseen' - hints at the materialistic mentality of the Jews confronting both the final Prophet and Prophet Moses (Mūsā). Even after witnessing

numerous miracles of Prophet Moses, peace be upon him, they did not believe his word that God had really spoken and insisted on seeing God for themselves face to face: ﴿وَإِذْ قُلْتُمْ يَـٰمُوسَىٰ لَن نُّؤْمِنَ لَكَ حَتَّىٰ نَرَى ٱللَّهَ جَهْرَةً﴾ *"O Mūsā! We shall never believe in you until we see Allāh manifestly"* (al-Baqarah, 2:55). The idolaters of Makkah also similarly declared: Why doesn't God speak to them (as well) if He really spoke to Muḥammad, peace be upon him. By saying that only those who 'believe in the (truth although) unseen' will truly accept this book, the Qur'ān is stating that its blessings are for those sensible and reasonable people who rely on reason and argument rather than their physical senses only.

The Qur'ān describes the believers as those who establish regular Prayer. Elsewhere it warns of what befalls those who fail in this: ﴿فَخَلَفَ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ خَلْفٌ أَضَاعُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَٱتَّبَعُوا۟ ٱلشَّهَوَٰتِ فَسَوْفَ يَلْقَوْنَ غَيًّا﴾ *"But after them there followed generations who lost all Prayer and followed their own lusts. Soon they will face destruction"* (Maryam, 19:59).

The Qur'ān also describes spending in the cause of Allāh as an important trait of the believers' character. This contains an admonishment - elaborated later - not to be like some scholars and religious leaders at the time of the revelation:

﴿يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلْأَحْبَارِ وَٱلرُّهْبَانِ لَيَأْكُلُونَ أَمْوَٰلَ ٱلنَّاسِ بِٱلْبَـٰطِلِ وَيَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۗ وَٱلَّذِينَ يَكْنِزُونَ ٱلذَّهَبَ وَٱلْفِضَّةَ وَلَا يُنفِقُونَهَا فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَبَشِّرْهُم بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ﴾

*O you who believe! There are indeed many among the rabbis and the monks who devour the wealth of people in falsehood, and hinder (them) from the way of Allāh. And there are many who hoard up gold and silver and spend it not in the way of Allāh: announce to them a most painful punishment"* (at-Tawbah, 9:34).

Similarly, in the words *'and they believe in what is revealed to you ....'* there is a hint of sectarian prejudices that had become a great hurdle for some of the Jews of the time in believing in the Qur'ān. For example, when invited to believe in the final book of Allāh, the Qur'ān, the Jews retorted that what had been revealed to them was sufficient:

﴿وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ ءَامِنُوا۟ بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ قَالُوا۟ نُؤْمِنُ بِمَآ أُنزِلَ عَلَيْنَا وَيَكْفُرُونَ بِمَا وَرَآءَهُۥ وَهُوَ ٱلْحَقُّ﴾

*"And when it is said to them: Believe in that which Allāh has revealed, they say: we believe in that which was revealed to us. And they disbelieve in that which comes after it, even though it is the truth"* (al-Baqarah, 2:91).

The description of the believers as those who are certain of the Hereafter likewise contains an indirect hint that there were others whose notion of the Hereafter was not well-founded. The polytheists and even

some Jews had come to believe in intercession. The latter had also deluded themselves into thinking that at worse their punishment would be for a few days only. Obviously such a belief in the Hereafter is totally meaningless; its hollowness is exposed in these words:

﴿قُلْ إِن كَانَتْ لَكُمُ ٱلدَّارُ ٱلْآخِرَةُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَالِصَةً مِّن دُونِ ٱلنَّاسِ فَتَمَنَّوُا۟ ٱلْمَوْتَ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٩٤﴾ وَلَن يَتَمَنَّوْهُ أَبَدًۢا بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌۢ بِٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٩٥﴾ وَلَتَجِدَنَّهُمْ أَحْرَصَ ٱلنَّاسِ عَلَىٰ حَيَوٰةٍ وَمِنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا۟﴾

*"Say: if the last abode, with Allāh, is for you specially, and not for anyone else, then long for death (for you must long for death) if you are truthful. But they will never long for it, because of the (sins) which their hands have sent before them. And Allāh is well-aware of wrongdoers. You will indeed find them, of all people, most greedy of life, even more than the idolaters"* (al-Baqarah, 2:94-95).

From the details concerning the God-conscious, the *muttaqīn,* as mentioned in the Qur'ān, the picture that emerges is, on the one hand, of the true believers, who, thanks to their *taqwā*, God-consciousness or fear of Allāh, were blessed with belief in the Qur'ān. On the other hand, there is the picture of the Jews and their allies of that time who had no fear of Allāh in their hearts and consequently were deprived of all the blessings that flow from it. Hence their failure to respond to the call and to believe in the Qur'ān.

It is indeed a unique miracle of Qur'ānic eloquence that it unveils such a detailed picture in so few words and sets the scene for the replacement of the descendants of Israel with those of Ismā'īl as future torch-bearers of the message of truth and justice.

## VERSES 6-7: THEMATIC CONTINUITY

The characteristics of those who believed in the Qur'ān and Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, are given in verses 1-5 above. There then follows a description of those who refused this blessing.

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ سَوَآءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَأَنذَرْتَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تُنذِرْهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٦﴾

Those who disbelieve, it is the same for them whether you warn them or do not warn them; they will not believe. (6)

خَتَمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِمْ ۖ

Allāh has set a seal on their hearts and

وَعَلَىٰٓ أَبْصَـٰرِهِمْ غِشَـٰوَةٌ ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ۝٧

on their ears, and over their eyes there is a covering, and for them awaits a mighty punishment. (7)

## WORD STUDY AND EXPLANATION

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ سَوَآءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَأَنذَرْتَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تُنذِرْهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ۝٦

*Those who disbelieve, it is the same for them whether you warn them or do not warn them; they will not believe.* (6)

### *Kufr*, meaning and significance

Literally, the word *kufr* means to cover up and to conceal. The Qur'ān also uses it in opposition to both *shukr*, gratitude, and *īmān*, faith. So it conveys ingratitude and lack of appreciation for kindness in the first case, and denial and rejection in the second.

The Qur'ān has used the word *kufr* both in a general sense as well as in relation to a particular object. Where it is used in relation to an object, it clearly means its denial and repudiation. However, when used in a general sense, it usually signifies denial of all the essential articles of belief. At some places, however, it has also been used in the sense of ingratitude and lack of appreciation for received blessings. The sense in which the term is used can be determined from the context.

### "those who disbelieve" - who are these people?

In the present context, the words *al-ladhīna kafarū* - those who disbelieve - refer to a specific group of disbelievers, who possess some other special characteristics mentioned here. For instance, they are a kind of people to whom being warned or not makes little difference: it is the same for them whether you warn them or do not warn them; they will not believe. In consequence, Allāh has set a seal over their hearts and ears, and their eyes are covered by veils. Obviously this description does not apply to all categories of disbelievers. There were, for example, many among them who were strongly opposed to Islām in the beginning but embraced it later on. Those mentioned in these verses are therefore a particular type of people. But who are they precisely? In our view they are the leaders of the Quraysh, the People of the Book or followers of earlier revelation, and the hypocrites, who, though fully convinced of the truth of the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, persisted in their denial. The evidence for this is presented below.

Firstly, in the previous section dealing with the believers, the words *yu'minūna bi-l ghayb* (they believe in the truth, though unseen) refer to the fair minded, conscientious and God-fearing descendants of Ismā'īl and the

People of the Book. They were morally alive, their faculties were unblemished, and their hearts were sound. All such people later believed in the message of the Qur'ān. The second group - *al ladhīna kafarū* - is placed in direct contrast to this first group of believers. One cannot but reach the conclusion that this is a reference to those errant leaders and chiefs of the polytheists, Jews and hypocrites who knew the message of the Qur'ān to be genuine, yet they tried their utmost to frustate and defeat it. Other verses in the Qur'ān support this conclusion.

﴿مَن كَفَرَ بِٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعۡدِ إِيمَٰنِهِۦٓ إِلَّا مَنۡ أُكۡرِهَ وَقَلۡبُهُۥ مُطۡمَئِنُّۢ بِٱلۡإِيمَٰنِ وَلَٰكِن مَّن شَرَحَ بِٱلۡكُفۡرِ صَدۡرٗا فَعَلَيۡهِمۡ غَضَبٞ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَلَهُمۡ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٞ ۝ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمُ ٱسۡتَحَبُّواْ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنۡيَا عَلَى ٱلۡأٓخِرَةِ وَأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهۡدِي ٱلۡقَوۡمَ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ۝ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ طَبَعَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمۡ وَسَمۡعِهِمۡ وَأَبۡصَٰرِهِمۡۖ وَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلۡغَٰفِلُونَ ۝﴾

*Anyone who denies Allāh after having believed except under compulsion, the while his heart remains firm in his faith but those who willingly open their heart to a denial of the truth - on them is wrath from Allāh, and theirs will be a dreadful punishment. This is because they love the life of this world better than the Hereafter: and Allāh will not guide those who reject faith. Those are they whose hearts, ears and eyes Allāh has sealed up. It is they who are heedless* (an-Naḥl, 16: 106-108).

From this verse it is quite obvious that those who reject truth, after having accepted it or being fully convinced of it, because of love for 'the life of this world' would incur the wrath of Allāh and dreadful punishment. Allāh does not open the way of faith to them, but seals up their 'hearts, ears and eyes'. Obviously this description is only apt for the errant Quraysh leaders, Jewish scholars and hypocrites of the time:

﴿تِلۡكَ ٱلۡقُرَىٰ نَقُصُّ عَلَيۡكَ مِنۡ أَنۢبَآئِهَاۚ وَلَقَدۡ جَآءَتۡهُمۡ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلۡبَيِّنَٰتِ فَمَا كَانُواْ لِيُؤۡمِنُواْ بِمَا كَذَّبُواْ مِن قَبۡلُۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَطۡبَعُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِ ٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ ۝﴾

*Such were the towns whose accounts We (thus) relate to you. There came to them their messengers with clear signs but they would not believe what they had rejected before. Thus does Allāh seal up the hearts of those who reject faith* (al-A'rāf, 7:101).

﴿فَبِمَا نَقۡضِهِم مِّيثَٰقَهُمۡ وَكُفۡرِهِم بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَقَتۡلِهِمُ ٱلۡأَنۢبِيَآءَ بِغَيۡرِ حَقّٖ وَقَوۡلِهِمۡ قُلُوبُنَا غُلۡفُۢۚ بَلۡ طَبَعَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيۡهَا بِكُفۡرِهِمۡ فَلَا يُؤۡمِنُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلٗا ۝﴾

*So, because they broke their covenant with Allāh, rejected the signs of Allāh, killed the messengers unjustly, and because they said, "Our hearts are wrapped up in covers," Allāh has sealed*

*their hearts as a result of their denial of truth. Little it is they believe* (an-Nisā', 4:155).

﴿ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ ءَامَنُوا۟ ثُمَّ كَفَرُوا۟ فَطُبِعَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ ۝٣﴾

*That is because they believed, then they rejected faith. A seal was then set on their hearts: therefore they understand not* (al-Munāfiqūn, 63:3).

From these Qur'ānic statements it is clear that the words *alladhīna kafarū* refer to a group drawn from many affluent backgrounds united in their vehement opposition to the Prophet, peace be upon him. However, the opinion of Ibn 'Abbās should be noted. In his view it applies specifically to the recalcitrant among the People of the Book who, by rejecting all prophecies of their scriptures concerning Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, were guilty of violating their covenant with Allāh concerning His final Prophet. Rabī'ah ibn Anas is of the view that it refers to leaders of various parties who were most prominent in their opposition to Islām. The interpretation of Rabī'ah ibn Anas is more comprehensive and has wider implications. The evidence from the Qur'ān clearly supports this view, and for this reason we prefer it.

### *Indhār* and its significance

The word *indhār* means cautioning, warning and admonishing. The message of the prophets is based on strong rational arguments and evidence from human experience and the physical universe. It also contains elements both of warning (*indhār*) and the giving of good news (*tabshīr*) – good news of success, salvation and fulfilment both in this life and in the Hereafter for those who respond to the call of the prophet and follow the straight path. *Indhār* in this context means a forewarning of dangers and disaster faced in this life as well as in the life Hereafter by those who willfully reject the message of the prophet. All prophets are warners as well as bearers of good news. The element of warning is appropriately pre-eminent in the prophetic message in dealing with an obstinate audience whose opposition stems not from any misunderstanding but from sheer envy, hatred and animosity. The verse under discussion refers to those opponents and enemies of the Prophet who opposed him not because of any misunderstanding, but merely out of arrogance and hatred for the truth and despite recognising the message and the Messenger of Allāh. This explains why the Prophet's mission is described here as *indhār*, warning or cautioning these arrogant people of the inevitable natural consequences of their unbelief and intransigence.

Ignorance of this aspect of *indhār* leads some to object that religion tries to coerce people into submission by imaginary fears, rather than engage them in rational dialogue. This indicates a misunderstanding of the message

of the Qur'ān: it is not limited to delivering a warning or good news only but is based on sound psychological and rational arguments. Warning and giving good news represents only part of its message. Second, those who raise this objection are also unable to appreciate the real significance and importance of moral values. They know, for example, that a person who swallows lethal poison inevitably dies but they cannot understand how disbelief, hypocrisy and falsehood can also ruin people. The Messenger of Allāh, however, is fully aware of the serious consequences and effects of moral values. He therefore warns people about these consequences in a manner and a tone that appropriately reflects his conviction and concern. The Qur'ān describes this process as *indhār* or giving warning.

خَتَمَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَعَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِمْ ۖ وَعَلَىٰٓ أَبْصَـٰرِهِمْ غِشَـٰوَةٌ ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ۝٧

*Allāh has set a seal on their hearts and on their ears, and over their eyes there is a covering, and for them awaits a mighty punishment.* (7)

***Khatama Allāhu***

The word *khatama* in Arabic means to set a seal with wax, clay, or some other similar material. Later, it came to be used in a derived sense of placing a seal on a letter or closing a thing in such a manner that nothing is able to enter it or come out of it.

In the Qur'ān, sometimes when an act is attributed to Allāh, its purpose is merely to point out an operative law or the principle. This style is common and is widely used in almost every language. There are plenty of such examples both in the Arabic language and the Qur'ān. Although the act of setting a seal on hearts is attributed as an act of Allāh, its purpose is to emphasise the Divine law that Allāh has laid down concerning guidance and error under which some are guided while others are left astray. The enactment of the law finally results in the sealing up of hearts of some people. A more detailed discussion follows.

***'Alā sam'ihim***

A question may rise in some minds about why the word *sam'a* (hearing) is used as a singular while the other two words *qulūb* (hearts) and *abṣār* (eyes) are used in their plural form. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to use its plural *asmā'* for the sake of harmony? The answer to this, in my view, lies in the usage and convention of the Arabic language. This word has been used in the Qur'ān in more than twenty different places, mostly along with the words *qulūb, af'idah* (hearts or intellects) and *abṣār*. In each case it is used in its singular form, never in the plural. Obviously, the Qur'ān is the most outstanding example of standard Arabic, and as such we must admit that this is how the word has been used by all authentic writers of standard Arabic.

## SEALING OF HEARTS AND DIVINE LAW

Setting a seal on hearts does not mean sealing in any physical sense, but only in the moral and spiritual sense. The people concerned have eyes, ears and understanding like everyone else, but restrict them to the here-and-now. They are unconcerned and uninterested in the reality beyond physical phenomena, and they do not give heed even if someone draws their attention to such realities. They are so deeply engrossed in the material life and its transitory pleasures that they are simply incapable of paying attention to any thing else. All their energies and intelligence are geared to just one objective: gratification of their physical and sensuous pleasures. Consequently, though extremely intelligent and clever when dealing with the material world, they are indifferent and rather stupid when confronted with moral and spiritual values and questions. Their outlook is gradually so thoroughly corrupted that they come to like only what further exacerbates the situation and adds to their perversion. Anything against their desires and caprices, no matter how reasonable and sensible, becomes weird and distasteful. It is this condition that is described here as sealing of the heart. It means that they have so thoroughly corrupted their faculties by their misdeeds that their hearts have lost the ability to listen attentively to, and understand the words of the Prophet sent by Allāh to guide them.

Allāh has created every man and woman with the best possible capabilities. He gave them the knowledge and power to distinguish between good and evil, and then placed in them an inherent inclination to like what is good and to hate and shun that which is evil. Besides these gifts, Allāh also has given human beings the freedom to choose between good and evil. This moral choice plays a decisive role in enhancing or diminishing the human being's natural faculties. When men and women take the path of goodness and virtue, their natural potential develops and grows and Allāh grants them further help and support in their efforts. On the other hand, if they follow their desires and caprice and take the evil path, slowly and gradually their hearts are tainted with evil till they are overwhelmed by darkness and all goodness is squeezed out. It is at this point that the law laid down by Allāh takes effect and a person's heart is sealed. The personality and inclinations of such a person become so perverse that all his interests and attention are focussed on evil only. Such a person finds the mere mention of righteous deeds distasteful and repugnant.

The Qur'ān has mentioned repeatedly that whenever a seal is set on a person's heart it is invariably in consequence of his own miseeds. For instance:

﴿أَوَلَمْ يَهْدِ لِلَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ ٱلْأَرْضَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ أَهْلِهَآ أَن لَّوْ نَشَآءُ أَصَبْنَٰهُم بِذُنُوبِهِمْ ۚ وَنَطْبَعُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ ۝﴾

Hereafter. The concluding words of the verse – and for them awaits a mighty punishment – refer to the natural consequence of sealing up of the hearts. This will be fully apparent in that life.

This explanation of the sealing up of the hearts is supported by aḥādīth or sayings of Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him. We give below one such ḥadīth:

> Allāh's Messenger, peace be upon him, said, "When a believer sins a black spot appears on his heart because of it. If he repents and desists from it and asks forgiveness of Allāh, the spot is wiped off his heart, but if he persists in sin so much so that its darkness envelops the whole of his heart, then that is the rust as mentioned by Allāh Most High in the verse (83:14), ﴿كَلَّا بَلْ رَانَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِم مَّا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ﴾ (*'The darkness of their misdeeds has covered their hearts like rust'*)" (Tirmidhī, Kitāb at-Tafsīr, ḥadīth no. 334).

Ibn Kathīr, on the authority of Al-A'mash[38], has reported that once Mujāhid explained how the Companions of the Prophet considered the heart to be like the palm of the hand: when a person is involved in any sins, his heart is compressed like this, and he closed one of his fingers. If he goes on sinning, then, and he closed the second finger, his heart is further compressed. He closed his third finger, and finally all the fingers and said, 'Thus when the heart is overwhelmed by sins and is compressed, it is sealed up.'"

Mujāhid also said that the companions of the Prophet considered this sealing up to be the rust that is mentioned in the Qur'ānic verse, ﴿كَلَّا بَلْ رَانَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِم مَّا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ﴾ *"Nay, the darkness of their misdeeds has covered their hearts like rust"* (al-Muṭaffifīn, 83:14).

## FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM

With this explanation of the real nature of 'sealing up of the hearts', we need not get entangled in the controversy that has been raging between the scholastic schools of Ash'arī and the Mu'tazilah. Quite unnecessarily, this verse has been dragged into this dispute. The Qur'ān supports neither the kind of determinism postulated by the Ash'arī nor the concept of free will as proposed by the Mu'tazilah. Rather, the truth lies somewhere in between these two extreme positions. This is not a suitable place for a detailed discussion of this issue. However, we would explain certain basic principles which we hope, Allāh willing, will be sufficient for those who would like to consider this issue objectively, without any sectarian bias or prejudice.

[38] Al-'Amash, Sulaymān ibn Muhrān Abū Muḥammad al-Asadī, al-Kaḥīlī, al-Kūfī al-Ḥafiẓ, Shaykh al-Islām, famous scholar and jurist, born in Rayy and died in Kūfah 61-148 AH/681-765 CE. Many, including Imām Abū Ḥanīfah, have narrated ḥadīth from him.

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*i.* Allāh has created all humans with a sound and healthy natural disposition, giving them the ability to distinguish between good and evil, and the freedom to choose between the two. Thus, to follow the good or the evil path depends on a person's own attitude and Divine grace. If a person decides to follow the path of righteousness, Allāh grants him the power and the ability to do so, but if he chooses to go the other way and follow evil, he is again allowed to do so, if Allāh so wills.

*ii.* Allāh will hold a person accountable and reward or punish him only for those things for which He has granted the human being the freedom to choose, to accept or reject. And those who do not enjoy such a freedom are also absolved from any accountability by Allāh. The freedom of choice enjoyed by human beings is not something acquired by them in their own right, but is a gift from Allāh, and to be used only subject to Allāh's will. Allāh may, in the light of His knowledge and wisdom, allow or disallow a person's intended acts. Nonetheless, even when He disallows the fruition of any well-intended acts, a person is not deprived of the reward for that act of virtue. Similarly, when He prevents any evil scheme being fulfilled, it does not necessarily mean that He will not call its perpetrator to account for his evil intentions and the consequences that follow it.

*iii.* Wherever in the Qur'ān the absolute Will and Authority of Allāh is mentioned, it only means that no one, other than Allāh Himself, can prevent, alter or frustrate His will. This does not mean, however, that His Divine Will obeys no law whatever of justice and wisdom. Allāh is Most Just and Most Wise and none of His actions are devoid of wisdom or are unjust. Therefore, wherever in the Qur'ān Allāh's absolute Will is mentioned, it must be understood in the context of, and subject to, the law of wisdom and justice according to which He has chosen to run the affairs of this world. It would be wrong to think that He will flout and violate the way He has prescribed and the law of justice He has chosen for Himself. Thus, for instance, when Allāh says that He guides aright whomsoever He wills and leaves astray whomsoever He wills, it does not imply that the manner by which He guides or leads a person astray follows no law of justice and wisdom. Rather, it only means that people are guided aright or left to go astray in accord with the law pertaining to guidance and error that He has prescribed for them, and that no one has the power to alter or subvert this law laid down by Him for humans.

*iv.* When Allāh attributes certain actions to Himself, this is a matter of Qur'ānic style, and the real import is that these are a consequence of the unfolding of these laws and principles. For instance Allāh says: ﴿فَلَمَّا زَاغُوٓا۟ أَزَاغَ ٱللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ﴾ *"Then when they deviated, Allāh made their hearts deviate"* (aṣ-Ṣaff, 61:5); or at another place, ﴿وَنُقَلِّبُ أَفْـِٔدَتَهُمْ وَأَبْصَـٰرَهُمْ﴾ *"We turn their hearts and their sights"* (al-An'ām, 6:110). At all such places, usually the Qur'ān also explains the principle under which such actions take effect, by using words such as ﴿وَمَا يُضِلُّ بِهِۦٓ إِلَّا ٱلْفَـٰسِقِينَ﴾ *"Allāh leaves astray only the transgressors"* (al-Baqarah, 2:26). These hints are meant to focus the attention of the readers on the real cause beyond the apparent wording describing an incident.

*iv.* The eternal, most perfect, and all-comprehensive knowledge of Allāh does not in any way negate any of the laws ordained by Him. Undoubtedly, He knows from the very beginning about every human: whether he or she will follow the path of guidance or take the evil path. But the choice will be in accordance with the law that He has prescribed for them.

If readers bear the above-mentioned principles in mind, they will, Allāh willing, find that most of the problems in this regard are created not by the Qur'ān but by scholastic hair-splitting.

## THE THRUST OR REAL MESSAGE OF VERSES 6-7

First, the most obvious aspect of these verses is the message of hope and comfort for the Prophet, peace be upon him, and of warning and reprimand for his opponents. The Prophet, peace be upon him, should not feel distressed thinking that the failure of these people to respond to the message of Islām is perhaps due to some weakness or flaw on his part in delivering the message to them or that the message in itself is in any way flawed or ineffective. He is assured that there is no flaw in his delivery of the message nor is there any weakness in him that prevents them from belief. The fault in fact lies in their own hearts. They have been consistently rejecting the clear proofs of Allāh's message and as a result of this persistent denial of truth they are now overtaken by the Divine law, which has deprived their ears from the ability to hear the truth and their eyes to take heed from the fate of others. They are no longer able to perceive truth or adopt and follow it. There is, therefore, no hope of their ever coming back to the truth and following the path of righteousness. The only outcome that is left for them now is the punishment of Allāh that is bound to overtake them sooner or later.

Second, it is apparent from these verses that a person can receive faith

only if he is willing to use his God-given faculties of hearing, seeing and understanding properly and honestly. He must be ready and willing to keep his eyes, ears and mind open, if he is to find guidance, carefully observing and contemplating the signs in the heavens, in the earth, around him and within him. He must be willing to listen attentively to the word of Allāh, the message of His prophets and other callers to truth, consider them carefully and honestly and then hold fast to the truth that he thus finds, abide by it and persevere in it. Only thus can a person find guidance. If, however, he refuses to take this path or put to proper use the faculties given to him by Allāh or not use them at all, then he will not find guidance, however hard he may try. The door to guidance will be barred to him.

These verses show that the moral and spiritual development and excellence of a person depends entirely on his proper use of the remarkable faculties of hearing, seeing and understanding. Should a person refuse to use these faculties or fail to use them for the higher purpose for which they have actually been granted to him, Allāh causes these gifts – originally a grace from Him – to be turned into a burden and a liability. When a person fails to use them, they are manifestly a burden for him in that, despite having everything, the human being will feel confused and helpless in almost every walk of life. And when these faculties are misused, they are even a greater liability and source of misfortune. The human being may wander far and wide over every hill and dale, even high above in the heavens and the vastness of infinite space above, and yet be no wiser than he was at the outset of his fruitless venture into a wilderness. He is no nearer the path that leads to life, true success and prosperity in this world as well as in the one to come.

## VERSES 8-16: THEMATIC CONTINUITY

In the following verses, yet another group of unbelievers is introduced.

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَقُولُ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ وَبِٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْءَاخِرِ وَمَا هُم بِمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٨﴾

And there are some people who claim, "We believe in Allāh and the last Day," although they are not believers. (8)

يُخَـٰدِعُونَ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَمَا يَخْدَعُونَ إِلَّآ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

They seek to deceive Allāh and the believers, though they deceive only themselves, but they realise not. (9)

فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مَرَضًا ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْذِبُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

There is a sickness in their hearts, so Allāh increased their sickness, and a painful punishment awaits them because of the lies they keep telling. (10)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ لَا تُفْسِدُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ مُصْلِحُونَ ﴿١١﴾

And when it is said to them, "Do not spread corruption on earth," they say: "We are the ones who put things right." (11)

أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ ٱلْمُفْسِدُونَ وَلَٰكِن لَّا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

Indeed, they are the ones who spread corruption, but they do not realise it. (12)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ ءَامِنُوا۟ كَمَآ ءَامَنَ ٱلنَّاسُ قَالُوٓا۟ أَنُؤْمِنُ كَمَآ ءَامَنَ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُ وَلَٰكِن لَّا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

And when it is said to them, "Believe as others have believed," they say, "Shall we believe as fools believe?" Indeed, they are the foolish ones, but they do not know. (13)

وَإِذَا لَقُوا۟ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ قَالُوٓا۟ ءَامَنَّا وَإِذَا خَلَوْا۟ إِلَىٰ شَيَٰطِينِهِمْ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا مَعَكُمْ إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ مُسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

And when they meet those who believe, they say, "We believe," but when they are alone in the company of their devils (devilish allies), they say, "We are with you; we were only mocking (these people)." (14)

ٱللَّهُ يَسْتَهْزِئُ بِهِمْ وَيَمُدُّهُمْ فِى طُغْيَٰنِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Allāh will put them in derision, and He gives them rope in their trespassing, leaving them to wander blindly in their transgression. (15)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱشْتَرَوُا۟ ٱلضَّلَٰلَةَ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ فَمَا رَبِحَت تِّجَٰرَتُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ مُهْتَدِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

They are the ones who have bartered away guidance for error, but their transaction has not brought them any gain. And they were not the ones to find guidance. (16)

فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مَرَضًا ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْذِبُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

There is a sickness in their hearts, so Allāh increased their sickness, and a painful punishment awaits them because of the lies they keep telling. (10)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ لَا تُفْسِدُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ مُصْلِحُونَ ﴿١١﴾

And when it is said to them, "Do not spread corruption on earth," they say: "We are the ones who put things right." (11)

أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ ٱلْمُفْسِدُونَ وَلَٰكِن لَّا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

Indeed, they are the ones who spread corruption, but they do not realise it. (12)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ ءَامِنُوا۟ كَمَآ ءَامَنَ ٱلنَّاسُ قَالُوٓا۟ أَنُؤْمِنُ كَمَآ ءَامَنَ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُ وَلَٰكِن لَّا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

And when it is said to them, "Believe as others have believed," they say, "Shall we believe as fools believe?" Indeed, they are the foolish ones, but they do not know. (13)

وَإِذَا لَقُوا۟ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ قَالُوٓا۟ ءَامَنَّا وَإِذَا خَلَوْا۟ إِلَىٰ شَيَٰطِينِهِمْ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا مَعَكُمْ إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ مُسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

And when they meet those who believe, they say, "We believe," but when they are alone in the company of their devils (devilish allies), they say, "We are with you; we were only mocking (these people)." (14)

ٱللَّهُ يَسْتَهْزِئُ بِهِمْ وَيَمُدُّهُمْ فِى طُغْيَٰنِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Allāh will put them in derision, and He gives them rope in their trespassing, leaving them to wander blindly in their transgression. (15)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱشْتَرَوُا۟ ٱلضَّلَٰلَةَ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ فَمَا رَبِحَت تِّجَٰرَتُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ مُهْتَدِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

They are the ones who have bartered away guidance for error, but their transaction has not brought them any gain. And they were not the ones to find guidance. (16)

**Who are the people mentioned in verses 8-16?**

The previous verses (1-7) introduced two groups – those who believed, and those who rejected faith. A third group has now been introduced. While basically amongst the rejectors of faith, in certain respects they belong to a class of their own. Who are these people? Generally, it is understood to be a group of hypocrites. The problem with this view, however, is that the hypocrites were always eager to keep their real identity secret and ostensibly tried their best to remain within the fold of Islām and the Muslim community. They tried to conceal in their hearts whatever animosity or malice they might have had towards Islām and Muslims. It was only at certain critical moments that this malice would come to the surface. The group mentioned here, however, is clearly different from the ordinary hypocrites since neither their hearts were with the Muslims nor did they agree with them verbally. For instance, these people claimed to believe in Allāh and the Day of Judgement but were not even ready to make a verbal declaration of faith in Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, and the Qur'ān. Moreover, they considered themselves superior to Muslims. When asked to believe as others believed, they openly described the Muslims as fools. For these reasons, it would be wrong to consider these people as belonging to the ordinary run of hypocrites. They are a special case. If they are not from the ordinary hypocrites, who are they?

We believe this was a group of Jews at the time in Madīnah whose attitude and role in their fight against Islām was somewhat different from the Quraysh polytheists and unbelievers. The latter were not even ready to listen or consider the message of the Prophet – their minds were closed. Unlike them, this group wanted to fight Islām by following an apparently more compromising and expedient strategy.

This section of the Jewish community felt aggrieved because their books had prophesied that the final Prophet was to come from among the descendants of Ismā'īl, not Israel. The actual fulfilment of this prophecy in the person of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, the steady growth and spread of Islām, and the tremendous popularity of the Prophet among the Arabs, only served to make them all the more jealous and bitter. As the message of the Prophet continued to spread, they realised that the religious leadership of the world was slipping away from the hands of the descendants of Israel, and would soon pass on to the descendants of Ismā'īl. Sensing this, they were driven mad with envy and anger: how could Allāh bless the descendants of Ismā'īl, and not them? They believed that they alone deserved this Divine blessing and honour. As the blessings of Allāh upon the descendants of Ismā'īl multiplied, so did their anger and jealousy.

This group fully shared all these feelings against Islām and the Prophet with the rest of the Jewish community. They did not, however, consider

it wise to fight against the rising tide of Islām through a policy of outright rejection but were rather anxious for a sort of compromise between Islām and Judaism. They wanted the Muslims to accept them as believers and worshippers of God, because as far as belief in God and the Judgement Day was concerned, they also believed in both these truths like the Muslims. The Muslims, they argued, could believe in Muḥammad as a Prophet sent by God, and in the book brought by him as Divine revelation. They, however, should not be expected to subscribe to this belief as it would bring to an end the atmosphere of religious tolerance that at the time prevailed in the land. On the basis of this argument, they presented themselves as reformers who only wanted to set things right. In other words, their refusal to accept Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, and the Qur'ān, was in order not to create disruption and disorder. Instead, it was purely an effort to reform and set things right, for they wanted to prevent the anarchy and conflict allegedly created by this new prophethood and the new message.

Bearing in mind this analysis of the mental make-up and background of this group, we begin to realise and appreciate the subtle beauty and eloquence of the language of these Qur'ānic verses. The real designs of these opponents of Islām have been exposed. The severe Qur'ānic reprimand that their machinations evoked was most appropriate and timely.

The apparent harshness of the words used by the Qur'ān may be considered by some to run counter to its advice elsewhere on the manner of inviting people to Allāh. The Qur'ān has taught us to invite people to the way of the Sustainer with wisdom and goodly preaching. Concerning the people of the Book in particular, it stresses that any discussion on religion with them must be conducted in a most beautiful manner. Why then has the Qur'ān used words like foolish and mischief-mongers to refer to a group from among the People of the Book? Why has it called their leaders "devils and satans"?

In answer to this we would like to point out that these words are not used when calling them to Islām. They are only used towards the very end when by their persistent refusal, hostility and conspiracies against Islām they had proved that they were morally dead and their hearts were sealed against all goodness, faith and belief. These words are primarily addressed to those who valued their faith and religion to caution them against their opponents' real designs and to show them how low these self-styled chosen people, the erstwhile inheritors of Divine trust, had fallen morally and spiritually. They were charged by Allāh to reform the world but instead were now busy in actively promoting mischief and corruption.

Jesus too had to confront a similar mindset. Compared to the Qur'ān, the words that Jesus used for such Jewish contemporaries are far more harsh: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like

white-washed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones, and all uncleanness' (Matthew, 23:27); and 'You serpents, you generation of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to Hell?' (Matthew, 23:33).

## WORD STUDY AND EXPLANATION

وَمِنَ ٱلنَّاسِ مَن يَقُولُ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ وَبِٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْآخِرِ وَمَا هُم بِمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٨﴾
يُخَٰدِعُونَ ٱللَّهَ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَمَا يَخْدَعُونَ إِلَّآ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَمَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

*And there are some people who claim, "We believe in Allāh and the last Day," although they are not believers.* (8)
*They seek to deceive Allāh and the believers, though they deceive only themselves, but they realise not.* (9)

***Min an-nās***
The word *an-nās* in verse 8, meaning people or humankind, is a generic noun but in the present context it clearly refers to a specific group, namely, those Jews that conspired against the Prophet and the message of truth.

***yukhādi'ūn Allāh***
The verb *khāda'a* in verse 9 means to try to outwit or deceive someone, irrespective of whether the attempt succeeds or not. In reference to Allāh the word *yukhādi'ūn* means that in vain "they seek to deceive Allāh". However, by thus trying to deceive Allāh, they deceive only themselves. No one can deceive Allāh, but in trying to do so, a person ends up deceiving only himself.

***wa mā yash'urūn***
The verb *sha'ara* is used for discerning something tangible. Its use here is meant to point out the obvious fact that any attempt to deceive is nothing but self-delusion. The minds of these people, despite their arrogance and their claims to cleverness and cunning, are so befogged that they cannot perceive this obvious truth. This is because they have not yet experienced the evil consequences of their folly.

فِى قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مَرَضًا ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَكْذِبُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

*There is a sickness in their hearts, so Allāh increased their sickness, and a painful punishment awaits them because of the lies they keep telling.* (10)

The word *maraḍ* (sickness) is generally used in the Qur'ān in two senses: (1) rancour and envy, and (2) hypocrisy. Where it is used along with the word *nifāq* (hypocrisy) it always signifies rancour and envy. Where it is used on its own, it either covers both the senses, or is used in either of the two senses as defined by its context. Considering its present context, the word here clearly signifies envy and malice.

***Fazādahum Allāhu maraḍan***

The act of increasing their jealousy here is attributed by Allāh to Himself. However, it refers to the Divine law according to which a person who insists on nursing malice in his heart, rather than purifying it to receive the light of faith and guidance, will find himself in circumstances that further add to his venom, envy and rancour.

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ لَا تُفْسِدُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ مُصْلِحُونَ ﴿١١﴾
أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ ٱلْمُفْسِدُونَ وَلَٰكِن لَّا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

*And when it is said to them, "Do not spread corruption on earth," they say: "We are the ones who put things right."* (11)
*Indeed, they are the ones who spread corruption, but they do not realise it.* (12)

**Corruption on earth (*fasād fi-l arḍ*)**

*Ifsād fi-l arḍ* (causing mischief on earth) is a specific Qur'ānic term which means subverting the truth and the system based on it – a system founded on the worship of Allāh and obedience to His commandments and laws as conveyed by His prophets. The Qur'ān says that in the physical universe the will of the All Powerful God alone prevails, and this keeps it together and functioning smoothly. If anyone other than God had any power or say in its running, it would collapse and disorder would ensue. Similarly, in moral and spiritual life, if anyone other than Him were to have any say or the right to legislate and be worshipped and obeyed, it would utterly subvert the nature of morality, and ultimately poison the entire fabric of civilization and culture. As such, any effort that seeks to encourage this process is, in the sight of the Qur'ān, abetting corruption and mischief on earth, even if apparently motivated by good intentions and done in the name of reform or setting things right.

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ ءَامِنُوا۟ كَمَآ ءَامَنَ ٱلنَّاسُ قَالُوٓا۟ أَنُؤْمِنُ كَمَآ ءَامَنَ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ ٱلسُّفَهَآءُ
وَلَٰكِن لَّا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

وَإِذَا لَقُوا۟ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ قَالُوٓا۟ ءَامَنَّا وَإِذَا خَلَوْا۟ إِلَىٰ شَيَٰطِينِهِمْ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا مَعَكُمْ إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ مُسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

*And when it is said to them, "Believe as others have believed," they say, "Shall we believe as fools believe?" Indeed, they are the foolish ones, but they do not know.* (13) *And when they meet those who believe, they say, "We believe," but when they are alone in the company of their devils (devilish allies), they say, "We are with you; we were only mocking (these people)."* (14)

The words *kamā āmana an-nāsu* – as others have believed – refer to the Muslims who believed in Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him.

**The term "shayṭān" and its meaning**

The word *shayṭān* is an intensive form and means one who is hasty, hot-tempered, irascible, mischievous and insolent. These characteristics are found in human beings as well as in the jinns. Here, it refers to those Jewish leaders who were playing a leading part in the mischievous game of undermining Islām.

ٱللَّهُ يَسْتَهْزِئُ بِهِمْ وَيَمُدُّهُمْ فِى طُغْيَٰنِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

*Allāh will put them in derision, and He gives them rope in their trespassing, leaving them to wander blindly in their transgression.* (15)

The word *madda* means to give respite or latitude. The verse means that they are not taken to task but allowed to continue in their set ways. When finally called to account, they will have no excuse for their evil and corruption.

The words *yamudduhum fi tughyānihim* explain what is meant by *Allāhu yastahzi'u bihim* – Allāh will put them in derision. These people were complacent and happy in the belief that they had succeeded in deceiving both Allāh and the Muslims. They failed to perceive that by thus trying to deceive Allāh and His Prophet, and by reverting to their evil ways, they were only harming themselves. They could not comprehend that this attempt at deceiving the Prophet who sought to show them light was in fact sheer self-delusion and foolishness. They deceived themselves and not the Prophet, who sought to guide them to the light of truth.

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱشْتَرَوُا۟ ٱلضَّلَٰلَةَ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ ۖ فَمَا رَبِحَت تِّجَٰرَتُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ مُهْتَدِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

*They are the ones who have bartered away guidance for error, but their transaction*

*has not brought them any gain. And they were not the ones to find guidance.* (16)

The verb *ishtarā* means to purchase. Whenever a person buys a thing by paying a price for it, he clearly gives preference to it over the price that he pays. That is how the word *ishtarā* has also acquired a secondary sense of giving preference to something over another. The Qur'ān uses it in this sense at various places.

## VERSES 17-20: THEMATIC CONTINUITY

Two parables are propounded in these verses. The first depicts the condition of those who rejected the truth and whose hearts are sealed and are thus impenetrable to truth. The second applies to those who did not oppose Islām openly, but secretly planned and conspired against it.

مَثَلُهُمْ كَمَثَلِ ٱلَّذِى ٱسْتَوْقَدَ نَارًا فَلَمَّآ
أَضَآءَتْ مَا حَوْلَهُۥ ذَهَبَ ٱللَّهُ بِنُورِهِمْ
وَتَرَكَهُمْ فِى ظُلُمَٰتٍ لَّا يُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

They are like someone who sought to kindle a fire (for others), and as it lit up all around him, Allāh took away their light and left them in darkness, unable to see anything. (17)

صُمٌّۢ بُكْمٌ عُمْىٌ فَهُمْ لَا يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

Deaf, dumb and blind; they can never turn back (to the straight path). (18)

أَوْ كَصَيِّبٍ مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فِيهِ ظُلُمَٰتٌ وَرَعْدٌ
وَبَرْقٌ يَجْعَلُونَ أَصَٰبِعَهُمْ فِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِم مِّنَ
ٱلصَّوَٰعِقِ حَذَرَ ٱلْمَوْتِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ مُحِيطٌۢ
بِٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

Or like the rain coming down from the heavens which has darkness, thunder and lightning; on hearing thunderclaps, they thrust their fingers into their ears for fear of death, but Allāh encompasses the unbelievers. (19)

يَكَادُ ٱلْبَرْقُ يَخْطَفُ أَبْصَٰرَهُمْ ۖ كُلَّمَآ أَضَآءَ
لَهُم مَّشَوْا۟ فِيهِ وَإِذَآ أَظْلَمَ عَلَيْهِمْ قَامُوا۟ ۚ وَلَوْ

The lightning all but snatches away their sight. When it sheds light for them they walk on, but when darkness overwhelms them, they

شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَذَهَبَ بِسَمْعِهِمْ وَأَبْصَـٰرِهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٠﴾

stop. Allāh could, if He so willed, take away their hearing and sight (for ever). Allāh has power over all things. (20)

**The meaning of the two parables**

The first parable is of a person who kindled a fire to help and guide others on a pitch dark night. He worked hard at it until all the surrounding area was illuminated. But those for whom he had taken all the trouble failed to appreciate his efforts or benefit from the light. As a punishment for their ingratitude, Allāh took away whatever light they had and left them in pitch darkness where they could see nothing. Besides, they are also deaf, dumb and blind.[39] They are unable to hear or respond to any call, nor can they find their way by any sign or landmark. They are lost, with little chance of ever coming out of the darkness into which they have willfully plunged themselves or of returning to the right path.

In this parable, the person kindling the fire is prophet Moses, peace be upon him, who brought the light of guidance to his people which lit their surroundings and their life. However, the majority of the descendants of Israel turned their backs on this light soon thereafter, as a consequence of which they brought upon themselves Allāh's wrath.

Their deprivations and miseries are mentioned at great length in both the Gospel and the Torah. The Qur'ān also refers to this at various places. Here their condition is depicted in the form of a parable of a caravan of deaf, dumb and blind people groping and wandering on a dark, cloudy night. They can neither listen to any call nor can they respond to anyone or benefit from landmarks along the way.

In the second parable, the rain is the Qur'ān itself and the darkness refers to the hardships and trials that those who embraced Islām inevitably had to face in its cause. Thunderclaps and lightning stand for the warnings and admonitions of the Qur'ān to the grouping of Jews who considered the Muslims 'foolish' for their simple faith. As they were fully conscious of the fact that the Qur'ān is indeed a Divine revelation, they were specially sensitive to these warnings and admonitions. Obviously the right course for them was to respond to the call of the Qur'ān and believe in it sincerely, but they adopted a reverse course: they decided not to pay any heed to its message. The parable depicts this state of theirs by the words, يَجْعَلُونَ أَصَـٰبِعَهُمْ فِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِم (*'they press their fingers in their ears'*).

"When it sheds light on them" shows the confusion into which they

[39] *Summun bukmun 'umyun*: Concerning this verse, Ustādh Farāhī observes that the fact that these characteristics are mentioned without any conjunction separating them shows that all of these characteristics are present in them concurrently.

were thrown after the revelation of the Qur'ān. They did not know how to counter the Qur'ān. Its shining glory dazzled their eyes and its probing light was impossible to escape from. They were perplexed and unnerved and tried to counter it by whatever measures available. They resorted to every conceivable pretext. However, since it is always difficult to defeat truth by weapons of sophistry and fallacious argument, they found themselves in an impossible situation. When their fallacy was exposed they were plunged further into a state of confusion and disarray. They presented themselves as believers who like Muslims believed in Allāh and the Day of Judgement, but when asked to believe, like other Muslims, in the Prophet and the Qur'ān they flared up in anger, abusing and ridiculing the Muslims for believing in and following the Prophet.

**Difference between the two groups**

From the above, it is clear that these two parables are about two different groups. In the case of the first group their enmity means inflexible stubbornness and total rejection. They are like the blind and dumb, bent on opposition to the message of truth and refusing to listen to anything against their vested interests and prejudiced opinion. The opposition of the second group, on the other hand, emanates from feelings of envy and considerations of expediency. They are fully conscious of the threat that the emergence of Islām posed both to Judaism and Christianity (as they were formulated). They wanted to counter this threat, but the strategy that they adopted to achieve this purpose consisted of following their forefathers' religion while trying to stress as much as possible a sense of harmony between themselves and Islām and Muslims. In other words, stick to your ways while giving an impression that you are not much different from Muslims. They wanted the Muslims to forgo their claim to be true believers while validating their own position as believers. The Qur'ān categorically states that the truth cannot compromise its stance. Those who want to believe, let them believe honestly and sincerely without any reservation – like other Muslims have believed. Otherwise, they may follow any other path they want to follow and face the consequences of their actions.

The cunning scheme and the deception of this group is no less odious in the sight of Allāh than the inflexible rejection of the first group. This second group feels that they cannot counter the message of the Qur'ān by inflexible opposition and rejecting it outright. In their view, a better and a more expedient approach was needed to tackle it, which incidentally also shows that, unlike the first group, they were yet not dead morally; they still had some good in them which could have helped them to see and find the light. But, if they failed to do so and continued to flee from the truth, weaving webs of cunning schemes against the truth as they were doing at that time, they would soon, in accordance with the Divine law,

وَإِن كُنتُمْ فِى رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا۟
بِسُورَةٍ مِّن مِّثْلِهِۦ وَٱدْعُوا۟ شُهَدَآءَكُم مِّن دُونِ
ٱللَّهِ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And if you are in any doubt about what We have revealed to Our servant (Muḥammad), then produce one sūrah comparable to it, and call upon all your helpers and supporters beside Allāh if you are truthful. (23)

فَإِن لَّمْ تَفْعَلُوا۟ وَلَن تَفْعَلُوا۟ فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱلنَّارَ ٱلَّتِى
وَقُودُهَا ٱلنَّاسُ وَٱلْحِجَارَةُ ۖ أُعِدَّتْ
لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

But if you cannot do it – and certainly you shall never be able to do so, guard yourselves against the fire, whose fuel is people and stones, prepared for the unbelievers. (24)

وَبَشِّرِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
أَنَّ لَهُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ ۖ
كُلَّمَا رُزِقُوا۟ مِنْهَا مِن ثَمَرَةٍ رِّزْقًا ۙ قَالُوا۟ هَٰذَا
ٱلَّذِى رُزِقْنَا مِن قَبْلُ ۖ وَأُتُوا۟ بِهِۦ مُتَشَٰبِهًا ۖ وَلَهُمْ
فِيهَآ أَزْوَٰجٌ مُّطَهَّرَةٌ ۖ وَهُمْ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

And give good news to those who believe and do good works, that for them there shall be gardens beneath which rivers flow. Whenever they are provided with fruits from them for their sustenance, they will say: "This is what was given to us before." And they shall be provided with what looks similar. There, they will have spouses most pure, and there they will live forever. (25)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَسْتَحْىِۦٓ أَن يَضْرِبَ مَثَلًا مَّا
بَعُوضَةً فَمَا فَوْقَهَا ۚ فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ فَيَعْلَمُونَ
أَنَّهُ ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟
فَيَقُولُونَ مَاذَآ أَرَادَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَٰذَا مَثَلًا ۘ يُضِلُّ بِهِۦ
كَثِيرًا وَيَهْدِى بِهِۦ كَثِيرًا ۚ وَمَا يُضِلُّ بِهِۦٓ إِلَّا
ٱلْفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Allāh disdains not to propound a parable of a mosquito, or of something even smaller than that. Those who believe know that it is the truth from their Sustainer, while those who disbelieve say: What could Allāh mean by such a parable? Allāh leaves many astray thereby, and He guides many thereby. And He causes none to stray thereby except those who are depraved; (26)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَنقُضُونَ عَهْدَ ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مِيثَٰقِهِۦ

Who violate Allāh's covenant after having confirmed it,

وَيَقْطَعُونَ مَآ أَمَرَ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦٓ أَن يُوصَلَ وَيُفْسِدُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

and sever what Allāh has commanded to be joined, and create disorder in the land - it is they who are the losers. (27)

كَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَكُنتُمْ أَمْوَٰتًا فَأَحْيَٰكُمْ ۖ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

How can you reject Allāh, seeing that you were lifeless and He gave you life and He will then cause you to die, then restore you to life, and then to Him you shall all be returned? (28)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ لَكُم مَّا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَسَوَّىٰهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَٰوَٰتٍ ۚ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

He it is Who has created for you all that is on the earth. Then He turned to the heaven and fashioned it as seven heavens. And of all things He has full knowledge. (29)

## WORD STUDY AND EXPLANATION

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ٱعْبُدُوا۟ رَبَّكُمُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُمْ وَٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

*O people, worship your Sustainer, Who has created you and those who have gone before you, so that you may guard yourselves from Hell-fire;* (21)

This verse marks a digression from the general discourse about the Jewish community of the time. It is addressed especially to the polytheists of Arabia as is evident from its content, style and message. The word *an-nās,* meaning people or humankind, has a general significance, but here refers to the idolaters of Arabia.

***U'budū rabbakum***

***'Ibādah***: Please refer to the commentary on sūrah al-Fātiḥah for an explanation of the word *'ibādah*. In these words – 'worship your Sustainer' – the polytheists are asked not only to worship Allāh, but to worship Him in the manner taught to them by Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him. In other words, it is only by responding to him and following his

guidance that they can truly serve Allāh. It is this implicit sense of this sentence that ties it to the challenge that follows: *'if you are in any doubt about what We have sent down to Our servant'*. That is, "respond to the message to worship Allāh, and if you are in any doubt about the Scripture that has been revealed by Allāh to His Messenger, produce a chapter like it, if you can." By implication, this also means that the way they claimed to worship Allāh was in reality not His worship. The only true way to worship Allāh is to follow the way that is explained in this book revealed by Him.

**Who has created you and those who have gone before you**

The words 'and those before you' refer to their forefathers. Notwithstanding the fact that the Arabs in the pre-Qur'ānic period believed in Allāh as their Creator, they had exalted some of their forefathers as 'gods' that shared Divine attributes with Him. Their idols were made and worshipped as gods. By referring to these "gods" as "those who have gone before you," the Qur'ān points out that they were mere creatures of Allāh like everyone else, and had no share in Divinity. Therefore, they ought to worship and serve Allāh alone Who created them as well as those who had gone before them. They were not gods but mere human beings like others.

**so that you may guard yourselves from Hell-fire**

The use of the word *la'alla* in the sense of an expected or possible result of something is well-known, and this, in our view, is its real significance in the present context.

The word *tattaqūn* can mean two things: one, so that you may attain *taqwā* or piety, and two, so that you may save yourselves from the punishment of Allāh. In the present context both of these senses may be equally valid. We prefer the second meaning in which case its object will have to be assumed as suppressed or elided in a process of elision (*ḥadhf*), as is clear from the following Qur'ānic verse ﴿فَاتَّقُوا النَّارَ الَّتِي وَقُودُهَا النَّاسُ وَالْحِجَارَةُ﴾ *"then fear the fire whose fuel is human beings and stones"* (verse 24).

ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ فِرَٰشًا وَٱلسَّمَآءَ بِنَآءً وَأَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَخْرَجَ بِهِۦ مِنَ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ رِزْقًا لَّكُمْ ۖ فَلَا تَجْعَلُوا۟ لِلَّهِ أَندَادًا وَأَنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

*Who made the earth as a couch for you and the sky a canopy, and sent down water from the sky and thereby brought forth fruits as sustenance for you. So do not set up rivals for Allāh when you know (the truth).* (22)

**"So do not set up rivals for Allāh when you know (the truth)"**
The word *andād* is the plural of *nidd* meaning a peer, a rival, someone similar, or equal to another. Though the pre-Qur'ānic Arabs accepted the basic premises that affirm and lead to a belief in one God, they attributed partners to Him. They are reminded that they themselves knew and accepted that God alone has created them as well as those before them, that it is God Who has made the earth a resting place for them and the sky overhead a canopy; and that it is He alone Who sends down rain and causes thereby various kinds of fruits to grow for their sustenance. Why, then, associate others with Him - others who have no power or share in Divinity and are unable to provide any of these benefits? The words 'when you know (the truth)' in the present context would thus mean 'while you yourselves admit all this and recognise that Allāh alone is your Creator and Sustainer'.

وَإِن كُنتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِّن مِّثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُم مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ إِن كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

*And if you are in any doubt about what We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a sūrah (chapter) comparable to it, and call upon all your helpers and supporters beside Allāh if you are truthful.* (23)

**"and call upon all your helpers and supporters"**
The word *shāhid* (plural, *shuhadā'*, translated as 'helpers and supporters') means a leader, a spokesperson and a representative of a people espousing their cause, and could be, as the Arabs believed, from among human beings as well as from the jinn. In the pre-Qur'ānic period, poets and orators occupied a special position in Arab society. They acted as guardians and standard-bearers of national honour. It was also commonly believed that every poet had a jinn who inspired him and helped him compose poetry. The Qur'ān too, the unbelievers alleged, was a result of a similar inspiration. The verse challenges them to assemble all their allies and produce one sūrah of the Qur'ān. But if the assembly fails to help them at such a critical moment then they should know that the Qur'ān is indeed the book of Allāh and not forged by a human being or jinn.The Qur'ān alludes to this at other places: *"Say: 'If the whole of humankind and jinn were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur'ān they could not produce the like of it, even if they backed up each other with help and support'"* (al-Isra, 17:88). *"Or they say: 'He has forged it' Say: 'Bring then ten sūrahs forged like it, and call (to your aid) whomsoever you can, other than Allāh, if you speak the truth. But, if they (your false gods) answer not your (call), then know that this revelation is sent down with the knowledge of Allāh'* (Hūd, 11:13-14).

**if you are truthful**
This can mean either 'if your opinion about the Qur'ān that it is forged by a human is true' or 'if, as you believe, it is true that you have helpers and supporters other than Allāh'. In other words, if you really have supporters other than Allāh, then call upon them to help you, at this most critical juncture in your religious life, when you urgently need their help in order to protect your ancestral religion and the pantheon of your forefathers. I am inclined to the second meaning as it covers the other sense as well.

فَإِن لَّمْ تَفْعَلُوا۟ وَلَن تَفْعَلُوا۟ فَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱلنَّارَ ٱلَّتِى وَقُودُهَا ٱلنَّاسُ وَٱلْحِجَارَةُ ۖ أُعِدَّتْ لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

*And if you cannot do it – and certainly you shall never be able to do it, then guard yourselves against the fire whose fuel is people and stones which is prepared for unbelievers.* (24)

**whose fuel is people and stones**
These words of warning show the nature of the fire to these rejecters of the Qur'ān. The most ready fuel of this fire would be the wretched ones with traces of disbelief and polytheism. As such, this fire will flare up fiercely from within their own souls tainted by their unbelief and polytheism. Secondly, its fuel will be the stone idols that they worshipped.

**stones** (*al-ḥijārah*): Though a general term, the word 'stones' here clearly refers to the idols carved out of stones and worshipped as gods and goddesses. To say that they would be cast in fire is to add to the punishment of their worshippers and not to punish these lifeless objects. That day polytheists will see how weak and helpless their so-called gods are – gods that they adored, worshipped, and tried to please and on whose behalf they fought against the Prophet and his message. Such a humiliation of the symbols of unbelief is in fact meant to heap disgrace upon unbelief. At another place the Qur'ān says: *"Surely you (unbelievers) and the false gods that you worship besides Allāh, are but the fuel of Hell. You shall go down to it. If these had been gods, they would not have gone down to it, and you all will abide therein"* (al-Anbiyā', 21:98-99).

وَبَشِّرِ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ ۖ كُلَّمَا رُزِقُوا۟ مِنْهَا مِن ثَمَرَةٍ رِّزْقًا ۙ قَالُوا۟ هَٰذَا ٱلَّذِى رُزِقْنَا مِن قَبْلُ ۖ وَأُتُوا۟ بِهِۦ مُتَشَٰبِهًا ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِيهَآ أَزْوَٰجٌ مُّطَهَّرَةٌ ۖ وَهُمْ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

**Two kinds of sustenance (*rizq*)**

The word *rizq* (sustenance) is also worth careful consideration. In both the Arabic language and in the Qur'ān it is used in the sense of material as well as moral and spiritual sustenance. It is not limited only to things that we eat or drink. In fact, the knowledge and understanding that we have received through the Qur'ān and the Prophet, peace be upon him, is the true sustenance. That is why the Qur'ān describes revelation as *rizq* or sustenance for human beings. Prophet 'Īsā (Jesus), peace be upon him, is reported as having said, "Man does not live on bread alone; he lives on every word that God utters'" (Matthew 4:4).

Two interpretations are possible for the words 'was given to us before'. They either mean "before this in the worldly life", or "prior to this in this very Paradise". My teacher and mentor, Farāhī, tried to reconcile the two interpretations, but as stated above, in my view these words refer to the worldly life, as it becomes clearer later.

**Meaning of *azwājun muṭahharah***

The word *zawj* (plural, *azwāj*) means a pair. Man and woman are a pair to each other. There is a void within human beings which cannot be filled without their respective pairs. In no other way can either fill this sense of emptiness within them. That explains why no blessing for humans can be complete in its absence. We find the blessing of spouses or companions specifically mentioned in connection with Paradise, the ultimate blessing, to crown its perfection. The adjective 'most pure' show that they have been nurtured, trained and purified most assiduously for companionship of the people of the Paradise. All this is implied in the word *muṭahharah* (most pure), because *taṭ-hīr* means to work diligently on reforming someone's habits, character, temperament and behaviour. Thus, in sūrah al-Aḥzāb, after admonishing the Prophet's family about some aspects of social etiquette and behaviour, the Qur'ān says: ﴿إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ ٱللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنكُمُ ٱلرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ ٱلْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا﴾ *"Allāh only wishes to remove all abomination from you, O members of the (Prophet's) family, and to make you pure and spotless* (yuṭahhirakum taṭ-hīrā)*"* (al-Aḥzāb, 33:33).

۞ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَسْتَحْىِۦٓ أَن يَضْرِبَ مَثَلًا مَّا بَعُوضَةً فَمَا فَوْقَهَا فَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ فَيَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهُ ٱلْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ وَأَمَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فَيَقُولُونَ مَاذَآ أَرَادَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَٰذَا مَثَلًا ۘ يُضِلُّ بِهِۦ كَثِيرًا وَيَهْدِى بِهِۦ كَثِيرًا ۚ وَمَا يُضِلُّ بِهِۦٓ إِلَّا ٱلْفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

*Allāh disdains not to propound a parable of a mosquito, or of something even smaller than it. Those who believe know that it is the truth from their Sustainer, while those who disbelieve say: What could Allāh mean by such a parable? He lets many go*

*astray thereby, and guides many thereby. And He causes none to stray thereby except those who are depraved.* (26)

**Allāh disdains not to propound a parable**

*Ḍarab al-maṯhal* means to explain a truth through a parable. Higher spiritual realities and facts are difficult to grasp for most people unless presented in the form of a parable. This gives it a special place as a literary device in human speech. The sayings of the prophets and wise men are for the same reason often replete with such parables, as can be seen by casting a glance over the Torah and the Gospel. The speech of Prophet Jesus especially is full of them. Similarly, in the ḥadīṯh or statements of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, are found many such parables. The Qur'ān has excellent examples of such parables.

**Real significance of a parable**

In a parable, the really important factor is whether or not it successfully portrays the truth it is meant to represent; its various ingredients in themselves are not important. Whatever means are helpful in depicting a fact and conveying a message to others is employed in a parable to enhance its overall effect, whether it is a fly, a mosquito or a spider or something else. The Qur'ān, for instance, at one place refers to the helplessness of the gods of the polytheists saying that even if a fly were to snatch something from them, they would not be able to take it back from it nor do it any harm. It also compares the polytheists' trust and confidence in their gods and intercessors to a spider's web; one is as unreliable and flimsy as the other. The punctilious Jews who overstressed minor rituals while ignoring the cardinal principles of religion were described by Prophet Jesus as "straining out the gnat, and swallowing the camel" (Matthew, 23:24).

Such similes and parables are very useful in making the higher facts or subtle verities of life easily comprehensible to people in general. As such they have always been highly valued by all true seekers of knowledge and insight who benefit from them. On the other hand, those who are hostile to knowledge and reason and are swayed by their ambitions and caprices are irritated by such parables, because they unveil the facts and truths that go against their whims and selfish desires. The truth enshrined in a parable is so clear that it is not possible for them to attack it directly, so they focus on some minor parts of it to pour their venom and scorn. A case in point is the present verse which stresses the fact that a most important task in the sight of Allāh is to convey His message to His servants. For this purpose He uses all sorts of examples, even that of a lowly insect like a mosquito. Blinded by hostility, those who are not true seekers of knowledge, ignore this message and try to deflect attention from it by frivolous remarks such as, "How can this be a book of Allāh that finds nothing better than lowly

insects like a mosquito or a fly to explain and convey its message?" In this flippant way, they deceive themselves as well as others.

**and He causes none to stray thereby except those who are depraved**

**The meaning of *fisq***

The word *fisq* (the root word for *fāsiqīn* translated as the *depraved*) originally means to leave or to go out of. In the present context, it is used in the sense of leaving the bounds of goodness for evil, and crossing over from obedience to a state of disobedience, thereby breaking the command of Allāh. About Iblīs, the Qur'ān says: "He was one of the jinns, and he broke the command - *fasaqa* - of his Sustainer" (al-Kahf, 18:50).

There are various degrees of abandoning good and embracing evil, or forsaking obedience and taking the path to disobedience and revolt. An evil can be minor in nature or very serious, and similarly a refusal to obey can be negligible or it can grow into a rebellion. The Qur'ān uses this word (*fisq*) for all its various categories - from relatively minor evils to the most serious acts of disbelief and revolt. In the main, however, it has been used for those major evils which cannot co-exist with faith in any heart. The word *fisq* should not therefore be taken lightly in the sense of a minor evil as it is commonly defined by our jurists and scholastic scholars.

**The importance of kinship**

ٱلَّذِينَ يَنقُضُونَ عَهْدَ ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مِيثَٰقِهِۦ وَيَقْطَعُونَ مَآ أَمَرَ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦٓ أَن يُوصَلَ وَيُفْسِدُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰسِرُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

*Those who violate Allāh's covenant after having confirmed it, and sever what Allāh has commanded to be joined, and create disorder in the land – it is they who are the losers.* (27)

**and sever what Allāh has commanded to be joined**:

In our view, this refers to cutting asunder blood ties and relationships. After breaking the covenant of Allāh, the next evil thing that a wicked person can be guilty of is neglecting his blood relations, treating them with gross injustice or overindulgence. Fear of Allāh and maintenance of blood relationships, in the sight of Islām, form the basis of human culture and social polity; all human welfare and well-being depends on them. Therefore anyone who violates these two principles invariably creates disorder and corruption on earth. In other words, corruption and disorder in the earth is the inevitable consequence of violating our covenant with Allāh and severing the ties of kinship. The Qur'ān describes these two together as one

following from another. Thus, for instance, at one place we read: ﴿فَهَلْ عَسَيْتُمْ إِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ أَن تُفْسِدُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَتُقَطِّعُوٓا۟ أَرْحَامَكُمْ﴾ *"Would you, perchance, if you turn away (from Allāh), spread corruption in the land, and cut asunder your ties of kinship?"* (Muḥammad, 47:22).

It is in view of this intimate connection between the Divine covenant and the ties of kinship that Qatādah takes the words "what Allāh has commanded to be joined" to mean the ties of kinship in the above context. Ibn Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī also prefers this interpretation. Some people take it in a broader sense saying it refers to cutting asunder or violating whatever Allāh has commanded. On the surface of it, this interpretation may not be totally wrong, but when we look at other places where the Qur'ān uses this mode of expression, it invariably refers to ties of kinship. The vagueness of the style enhances and underlines the importance and significance of blood relationships. It is such an obvious fact that it does not have to be named, for everyone understands and recognises it as something that Allāh has commanded to be joined and not to be severed or violated. It lies at the very heart of the well-being and welfare of society, and its violation is tantamount to destroying the entire fabric of social polity.

كَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَكُنتُمْ أَمْوَٰتًا فَأَحْيَٰكُمْ ۖ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

*How do you reject Allāh, seeing that you were lifeless and He gave you life? and He will then cause you to die, then restore you to life, and then to Him you shall be returned?* (28)

**How can you deny Allāh?**

The word *kufr* (disbelief) has been explained above in verse 6. Here it is used to draw attention to a particular aspect. The people addressed here did believe in Allāh; they did not deny His existence, but they did, however, attribute partners to Him. As to the resurrection, they either denied it totally or considered it implausible, far-fetched and inconceivable. It is this dubious attitude of theirs to resurrection that is questioned here. "How can you deny Allāh" shows that the Qur'ān uses the term *kufr* (denial) in rather a broader sense; it covers denial of Allāh as well as denial of resurrection and implies the negation of the essential attributes of Allāh, such as Oneness, omnipotence, knowledge and justice. Just as an explicit denial of Allāh is *kufr*, any claim to belief in Allāh that is accompanied by a negation of any of His attributes is also a denial or *kufr*, as indeed it is in the case of a denial of resurrection.

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ لَكُم مَّا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَسَوَّىٰهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَٰوَٰتٍ ۚ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

*He it is Who created for you all that is on the earth. Then He turned to the heaven and fashioned it as seven heavens. And of all things He has full knowledge.* (29)

**Then He turned to the heaven and fashioned it as seven heavens:**

***Istawā and taswiyah***

The word *istawā* used in the text means to stand upright. Followed by the preposition *ilā*, it means paying attention to, or turning to something. This shows that Allāh created the heavens after the creation of the earth, but in a style that seeks to give us a graphic picture of the process of the creation of the heavens and earth. 'Standing upright' or 'turning to' in the present context must be understood in a sense that is fitting to the majesty and glory of Allāh, the Most Exalted One.

Similarly, the nominal form *taswiyah* means making even or smooth, and creating balance, moderation and proportion. In the vast heavens above us, whether we look at them with our naked eyes or through powerful scientific instruments, we cannot detect any flaw. Alluding to this, the Qur'ān says: ﴿مَّا تَرَىٰ فِى خَلْقِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ مِن تَفَٰوُتٍ ۖ فَٱرْجِعِ ٱلْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَىٰ مِن فُطُورٍ ۝ ثُمَّ ٱرْجِعِ ٱلْبَصَرَ كَرَّتَيْنِ يَنقَلِبْ إِلَيْكَ ٱلْبَصَرُ خَاسِئًا وَهُوَ حَسِيرٌ﴾ *"You will see no fault in the creation of (Allāh) Most Gracious. Then return your vision again, and again, but your gaze will come back to you dazzled, weary (but you will find no fault in it"* (al-Mulk, 67:3-4).

***Samā' or sumūw***

The word *samā'* or *samūw* means height. The canopy overhead that we call the sky is full of various signs and marvels. The Qur'ān draws our attention to its beauty and wonders. These clearly point out certain manifest facts and invite us to consider these with open minds. As far as the observation of the world or the universe is concerned, as a rule, the Qur'ān does not touch on things that are hidden from most people's eyes or are based on mere guesswork or conjecture, or cannot be seen by the naked eye, or can be observed through instruments such as microscopes and telescopes only, because there is room for a lot of difference and disagreement concerning them. Instead, the Qur'ān draws our attention to those undeniable facts which no just and honest person can dare deny. This Qur'ānic approach is also apparent from the way it mentions marvels of the heavens. It points out to us certain self-evident facts that need no proof beyond a gentle nudge or a simple hint, to awaken us and to engage our attention. The fact that there are seven heavens is mentioned to emphasise the vastness of Allāh's kingdom. This is not limited to the visible sky overhead and the bright stars that shine in it. Allāh's kingdom is

infinitely vast. Beyond the visible sky and its shining stars lie countless worlds that await being discovered and known.

## SEQUENCE OF MEANING IN VERSES 21-29

Let us pause here to review briefly what has been stated above and the order in which it is mentioned before discussing certain other aspects needing further elaboration.

To begin with, the descendants of Ismā'īl are invited in this section to respond to the message of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, and the Qur'ān, the Book of Allāh. They are invited to serve and worship Allāh and are told that after the advent of the final Prophet they could worship and serve Allāh only by embracing his message. Implied in this also is the sense that the way they had been worshipping Allāh was in fact no worship of Allāh because they associated others in His worship. Allāh has no associate or partner and associating others with Him in worship simply vitiates such worship.

The section, then goes on to describe some attributes of Allāh and their manifestation in the universe showing that there is one and only one God. If they are hesitant in accepting this message because they were not convinced that it was indeed revealed by Allāh, or if they thought that it was forged by its presenter or some helper of his, then to settle the issue, let them bring a chapter like it. If they could achieve that, then the Qur'ān's claim to be a revelation from Allāh will automatically stand refuted. To bring a chapter like it, they could seek help and support from all their helpers and supporters – poets, writers, orators, soothsayers, their gods and goddesses.

Then follows a warning of punishment for those who, though unable to bring anything remotely comparable to the Qur'ān, still stubbornly refuse to accept it as a revelation from Allāh. This is contrasted with glad tidings for those who respond to the message of the Qur'ān positively and follow the path of faith and righteousness. A remarkable fact mentioned here about the blessings of Paradise deserves special notice. When the people of Paradise receive their promised rewards and gifts, they would be pleased to find them much like the gifts they enjoyed in their worldly life. The fruits of the Garden will be remarkably similar to those found in this world. In a way, this is to show that the Book of Allāh, which its deniers allege to be merely a forgery and a fable, is a marvelous gift granted to the human race. When the veil surrounding our earthly life is finally lifted, they will find that all that the Qur'ān promised them was true. The people of Paradise will be overjoyed to find before them the blessings, fruits and gifts promised them in their worldly life by the Qur'ān. In a way, they would have already known and tasted these blessings previously,

thanks to the Qur'ān, during their earthly sojourn.

In a parenthetical interjection, away from the main theme, the descendants of Ismā'īl are cautioned that Paradise and its blessings as described here are merely a parable, because it is only through parables that anything relating to Paradise or Hell can be explained to the human being with all the constraints of his physical senses. Allāh is so eager to inform and instruct you, we are told, that He uses every kind of parable to make you appreciate the truth, whether drawing on the example of a mosquito or a fly. Those who are sincere seekers of truth understand and appreciate these parables and their knowledge and insight are enhanced, while those who are inclined to error make fun of these parables and are thus trapped in their error. Who are these people who instead of gaining knowledge and insight from these parables end up in loss and error, and what are their characteristics? The answer is brief but quite pregnant with suggestion. The answer also constitutes a forewarning for the descendants of Ismā'īl, that they should not waste their time in frivolous hair-splitting about such parables. If they succumb to this disease, they would also be deprived of this great blessing of Allāh that He had bestowed on them through His final Messenger and the revelation of His Book.

As this parenthetical comment ends, the above message beginning with the words "O people, worship your Sustainer" resurfaces in the verse, "How can you deny Allāh?" Then there follow two arguments concerning resurrection. One deals with the question of how Allāh Who created the human being in the first place can recreate him a second time. The second argument focuses on the overall providential care of Allāh (*rubūbiyyah*) that upholds and sustains the entire creation. This is discussed at length in the following pages.

From this analysis, it is clear that the above section is a coherent piece from the beginning to the end, with each part closely linked to the next. First comes the call to worship Allāh. This emphasises His oneness, because worshipping Allāh without accepting His oneness and associating others with Him in worship is meaningless. Then comes an invitation to believe in the Prophet and the miracle of the Qur'ān as an evidence of the Prophet's veracity. The punishment for rejection and the reward for acceptance of the truth comes next, with a warning against engaging in useless wrangling about words and forms used to convey the message. The warning is also against succumbing to the temptation of mocking the words of truth in the manner of earlier descendants of Israel. Lastly, there follows an invitation to believe in the Day of Judgement. The opening words in which this is couched, however, make it quite clear that those who claim to believe in Allāh but consider the resurrection of the dead an impossibility, are in fact not believers in Allāh: they are indeed deniers of, and disbelievers in, His existence.

## ELABORATION OF ARGUMENTS CONCERNING BASIC ISLAMIC BELIEFS

In the above section, some arguments concerning three basic beliefs of Islām – the Oneness of God, Prophethood and the Hereafter – are given which we would like to elucidate further.

### Argument for monotheism or *tawhīd*

Of these, the first argument relates to monotheism or to the oneness of Allāh and it is mentioned in these words:

﴿ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ فِرَٰشًا وَٱلسَّمَآءَ بِنَآءً وَأَنزَلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَخْرَجَ بِهِۦ مِنَ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ رِزْقًا لَّكُمْ ۖ فَلَا تَجْعَلُوا۟ لِلَّهِ أَندَادًا وَأَنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾﴾

*(Worship your Sustainer) Who made the earth for you as a couch and the sky a canopy, and sent down water from the sky and thereby brought forth fruits as sustenance for you. Therefore, do not set up rivals for Allāh when you know (better)* (al-Baqarah, 2: 22).

This argument for monotheism is based on the harmony and symmetry found amidst the variety and diversity in the universe: the sky stretched above the earth, the darkness of night pursuing daylight, winter following summer, and humans divided into two genders, male and female. On the face of it, this universe looks like a battlefield of various conflicting forces and elements. Deceived by this diversity, many falsely concluded that it was run by different gods, each controlling his or her own domain. Separate gods for light and darkness, good and evil were created. The Arabs were also no exception. They believed in two separate gods of earth and sky. The Qur'ān rejects this fallacious view, saying that any divergence and diversity found in the various elements of this universe is only superficial and that when looked at closely, a profound harmony and unity can be detected among all these opposites. The earth is spread like a carpet under your feet, it says, while the sky is spread overhead as a canopy. The water falls from heaven above and thereby different kinds of fruits are produced for you on the earth providing sustenance for you. Seeing such a close harmony between the earth below and the sky above, the Qur'ān reminds us, how can you believe that anyone other than Allāh has any say in their running, with one god controlling the earth and another one, the sky? How can such harmony be found in the divergent wills and plans of opposing deities, working together in such perfect accord, making the earth into a cradle and the sky as a canopy over you, nourishing and nursing you as a mother nurses her child? If any one other than Allāh had any say or control over various elements of this universe, their existing harmony and affinity would disintegrate.

We are thereafter warned, "So do not set up rivals for Allāh when you know (better)." In other words, you yourselves recognise and believe that Allāh alone has created the earth and the heavens the way they are, and that neither is created by anyone other than Him. For to believe in or associate anyone else with Allāh after a clear admission that He is the only Creator and Sustainer, is an obvious absurdity, as pointed out by the Qur'ān. The Arabs, as stated above, did not deny the existence of Allāh. They did believe in Allāh, but at the same time attributed partners to Him who shared in His power and authority. As such, there was no need to prove the existence of Allāh to them, but only to refute their polytheistic beliefs. The above argument is not meant to prove the existence of Allāh, but to emphasise His oneness. However, the manner it is put forth here spontaneously turns it into a further supportive evidence of the existence of a single Creator, Nourisher and Sustainer.

Further on, we will find this argument repeated in diverse forms and styles and this will be elaborated upon in its proper context.[40]

**Argument for prophethood or *risālah***

The second argument given here affirms the truth of Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, saying, *"And if you are in any doubt about what We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a sūrah (chapter) like it, and call in all your helpers and supporters beside Allāh if you are truthful. And if you cannot do it – and most surely you shall never be able to do it, then fear the fire whose fuel is people and stones which is prepared for the disbelievers"* (verse 23).

When the Prophet, peace be upon him, presented the Qur'ān to people as the book revealed to him by Allāh through the most trustworthy angel, Jibrīl, he presented the book itself as a clear evidence that it was indeed a Divine revelation. The polytheists of Arabia, encouraged and instigated by the contemporaneous Jews, rejected him and the book that he had brought to them. They raised various objections to it. Sometimes they said that it was authored by Muḥammad, peace be upon him, himself, and that he was falsely attributing it to Allāh. They also alleged that some other people were also involved in the preparation and composition of this book. Similarly, they also said that the Prophet was possessed and inspired by some jinns like other poets and soothsayers usually were. They asserted that there was nothing special or miraculous about the Qur'ān, and that they too, if they wished, could easily bring a book like it. They said all these things to show that the Qur'ān was not a Divine revelation, and as such it could not be presented in evidence of the truth and veracity of Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him.

[40] I have dealt at length with this subject in my work *The Meaning of Tawhid* (Urdu).

It is in response to these aspersions of theirs that the Qur'ān challenges its detractors to bring even a chapter like it. That is, if they are in doubt about its authenticity, this question can be settled very easily; if this book was forged by Muḥammad, then let them bring a chapter like it, to prove that they are right in their assertion that it is not a book of Allāh. As a final and conclusive proof of its veracity, the Qur'ān adds three more elements to this challenge.

i. Let them bring a single chapter like it. Previously they were challenged to produce a book like it, and could not. Then they were asked to bring only ten chapters similar to it. When they failed to respond to either of these challenges, they were in the end asked to produce just one chapter like it.

ii. They are told that if they could not produce a chapter like it on their own, let them seek help and support from their orators, poets, soothsayers, jinns and devils besides their gods and goddesses that they worshipped. Let them enlist the help of all of these to bring a chapter like it. But, if in spite of all this, they could not produce anything similar to the Qur'ān, then let them be honest and admit that the Qur'ān is indeed the book of Allāh rather than waste their time and energies in fighting against it.

iii. They are told that if they cannot do any of these things, now or ever afterwards, then instead of ruining their life both in this world and in the Hereafter, they should do something to protect themselves from the torment they are bound to incur if they stubbornly persist in rejecting the truth as enshrined in this book.

This challenge though originally addressed to the Arabs – because to challenge the non-Arabs in this manner would have been simply out of place – continues to confront all Arab and non-Arab deniers of the Qur'ān and Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him. Anyone so inclined may try his luck, test his prowess and bring something, even a short sūrah or chapter, comparable to the Qur'ān.

**Argument for resurrection or *qiyāmah***

The third argument concerns the resurrection and is stated in these words: *"How do you disbelieve in Allāh, seeing that you were lifeless and He gave you life, then He will cause you to die, then restore you to life, and then to Him you will all be returned? He it is Who created for you all that is on the earth. Then He turned to the heaven and fashioned it as seven heavens. And of all things He has full knowledge"* (verses 28-29).

As explained above, the word *kufr* or disbelief here refers not to a

denial of Allāh, but of resurrection. The disbelief in resurrection signifies in fact a rejection of Allāh's sublime attributes of omnipotence, providence, wisdom and knowledge. It is synonymous with a rejection of Allāh. To believe in Allāh without believing in these Divine attributes of His is meaningless. Having explained this point, the Qur'ān refers to evidence that the dead shall indeed be restored to life in a Day of Reckoning. Let us look closely at the Qur'ānic argument.

To begin with, it establishes the possibility of life in the Hereafter. This is the same common and oft-repeated argument rehearsed throughout the Qur'ān in diverse ways and forms. While you yourselves accept that Allāh alone has brought you into existence out of nothing, and seeing that you also know that He alone causes you to die after life, why should it be impossible for Him to restore you to life after your physical death? Why should it be difficult for Him to create you a second time after having created you the first time?

The mere fact that something is probable, however, does not necessarily mean that it would in fact come to pass. The resurrection may well be most probable, but why? What is the need for it? It is in answer to this question that we are told that Allāh, Who created the universe for our sustenance and so generously blessed us, giving us all that we need, Whose beneficence is manifest in every facet of this universe and Whose wisdom shines forth in each and every atom and particle He fashioned - how can such an All-Compassionate God leave the human being alone without distinguishing good from evil, and rewarding each of us according to merit? If this were the case, all His omnipotence and wisdom evident in everything in the heavens and the earth would indeed be nullified; His all-comprehensive knowledge – an essential attribute of the Creator of heavens and earth – also becomes inconsequential, indeed, meaningless. As this argument about the resurrection is rehearsed throughout the Qur'ān, we would find opportunity to revisit it in the subsequent pages.

From the above detail, it is clear that though addressed as an aside to the descendants of Ismā'īl, these verses embrace all the three basic principles of the Islamic message. That is, they invite all people to *tawḥīd* (monotheism), *risālah* (prophethood), and *ma'ād* (the life Hereafter) – along with their reinforcing arguments.

## TWO ASPECTS OF THE QUR'ĀN'S SUBLIME GLORY

### i. Inimitability

While inviting human beings to respond to the message of the Qur'ān, Allāh has in the above verses unveiled two aspects of its sublime glory. One of these, as pointed out above, concerns the fact that all people and jinn together cannot produce anything like it. This aspect of the Qur'ānic

majesty was quite obvious even while the Qur'ān was being revealed, since those who considered it a handiwork of a human or a jinn failed to bring anything similar to it despite their intense desire to refute its Divine origin. To this day, centuries after this challenge was first put forth, none of its inveterate enemies has yet been able to bring something even remotely comparable to it, not to speak of refuting its claim of being a unique and incomparable book.

**ii. Metaphorical description of the life Hereafter**

The second aspect of the Qur'ānic glory is that though unbelievers reject this book as a forgery and spurn its message on flimsy pretexts, such as criticising the parables and similes it employs to convey its message, those who believe in it will find one day all its promises fulfilled. On that day, regaled with the fruits of Paradise, they will be pleased that they already had, thanks to this Book, a foretaste of these fruits in their worldly life; in Paradise they will be actually enjoying them in their purest flavour. In other words, true believers in the Qur'ān who are conversant with the spiritual essence of its commandments and precepts do gain a glimpse of Paradise and its blessings, as well as of Hell and its torments, in their worldly life. Implied in this is also the fact that the blessings of Paradise are in reality a manifestation of the good – teachings and commandments – ordained in the Qur'ān: all these virtues will appear before the dwellers of Paradise in their true form and shape. Similarly, the bitter consequences of the wrongdoings prohibited by the Qur'ān and awaiting the guilty in the form of diverse punishments in Hell will be manifestations of all their evil in their extreme ugliness. The realities of the life Hereafter cannot be comprehended in any human tongue; they can only be described in a metaphorical sense only. Only in the Hereafter when all the veils and the physical constraints under which we live in this world are removed will we be able to perceive and truly understand the true reality. Then, we will be able to understand and unravel even the most subtle mysteries.

Depending on their spiritual capacity, believers will become familiar with the charms of various virtues, but their true and full flavour will be hard to taste in full measure because of the constraints of earthly life. Various statements and reports from the prophets and other righteous persons show that they enjoyed the sweetness latent in different good deeds – faith, Islām, prayers, charity, self-sacrifice and others – in this life. Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, for instance, said: "The comfort of my eyes is in Prayer." [Fatḥu-l Bārī, 11:345, Musnad Aḥmad, 128, 199, 285.] Similarly, in another ḥadīth, he is reported to have said, "If people knew what (blessings) are hidden in the 'Ishā' (late night) Prayer they would come to it even crawling on their bellies." [Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, Kitāb al-adhān, ḥadīth no. 657.] Similar statements are on record from the Companions of the Prophet as well as other pious persons.